June 2002
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin

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Published by
The Amberlin Group, LLC.

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If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links we will update our archived issues accordingly. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@amberlin.com and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

SPECIAL NOTE: We'd like to take a moment to thank several people who made this first issue possible. To our volunteer staff (Reuben, JW, Peter, Christine) -- your contributions have been fantastic. We could not have done this without you. And to the celebrated Robin Hobb, who took time out of her busy publishing/writing schedule to craft a wonderful article for this pilot issue, we thank you sincerely for your contribution of talent.

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referrenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on this site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

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Note From the Editors

June 2002

Welcome to the first issue of **DEEP MAGIC**.

On our website, we use a tag-line: Safe places for minds to wander. Rather than bore you with a definition, we will try to explain it this way. If you walked into Disneyland, you would not see a lot of soda cans or ice-cream sandwich wrappers on the streets. If you opened a book by C.S. Lewis, you would not find any profanity. If you pop in the DVD of Shrek, however, you would find an ogre farting in a pond and killing fish. Welcome again to DEEP MAGIC – a clean (but sometimes irreverent) e-zine.

There seems to be a trend in the fantasy genre these days: "grit is in." Grab the latest George R.R. Martin novel if you'd like to read a great author describe incest, a lawless world that makes the 12th century seem like Boy Scout camp, and hopeless, heartbreaking situations where you secretly wish the protagonists will die to end their suffering. There is undeniably a market for this kind of fiction. But this e-zine is not oriented toward that market.

If the Motion Picture Association were going to rate our content, you would find that most of DEEP MAGIC is rated PG or G. We're in good company. Out of the top 25 movies of all time (internationally, of course: http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com/), five are rated G, six are rated PG, fourteen are PG13, and only one is rated R. So when we review a new fantasy book or movie, we will give it a letter grade (A,B,C,D, or F – just like the American school grading system) and a "MPAA" rating (G, PG, PG13, or R). If any of you are unfamiliar with these U.S. standards, let us know and we'll direct you to some websites that will explain it. If you like more blood-letting in your literature or prefer downloading pictures of naked girls with swords, there are plenty of other websites to choose from out there. But do not ask us for any recommendations on those.

Final comments before you turn the "e-page," so to speak. We would like to hear from you. Let us say it again – we would like to hear from you. If you particularly enjoyed a story or piece of artwork, send us an e-mail at feedback@amberlin.com (use the subject line to tell us who should receive the message) so we can forward it on to the right person. If you would like to contribute a book review or article or story or artwork or limerick or letter to the editor, send us an e-mail to submissions@amberlin.com (again, use the subject line to tell us what you are submitting). We plan to put a poll in every issue. Take time to vote – we really do care about your input and we will publish the results in the next issue. We are also going to offer a Writer's Challenge in each issue. Participate if you feel like it.

If you like what you read in this issue, tell a friend (by e-mail, IM, chatroom, mental telepathy – you can actually tell your friend with your mouth or over the phone, but these are archaic technologies, and this is an e-zine after all…)

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Poll: Who is the Greatest Mentor?

Call it a cliché, call it a necessary element; the mentor is one of the most commonly used characters in epic Fantasy. There have been some greats and some not-so-greats. We've compiled a list of those we feel are among the best. Which one do you think is the best? Gandalf? Alannon? Vote in our poll, and we'll post the results in next month's issue. (Click anywhere in the poll box to be taken to the poll page on the website.)

Famous Mentors

Who is the Greatest Mentor in Fantasy?

- Allanon (Shannara series by Terry Brooks)
- Albus Dumbledore (Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling)
- Aslan (Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis)
- Belgareth (The Belgariad & The Malloreon by David Eddings)
- Dallben (Prydain Chronicles by Lloyd Alexander)
- Gandalf (Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien)
- Merlin (Arthurian legend, Marion Zimmer Bradley)
- Moiraine Sedai (Wheel of Time series by Robert Jordan)

Results from April 2002 Polls

We asked readers what was more important to include in the e-zine. Here's what they said.

- fantasy short stories: 38.46%
- science fiction short stories: 19.23%
- improving your writing: 15.38%
- cool artwork: 15.38%
- fantasy novels: 11.54%
- advertisements (no seriously): 0.00%
- science fiction novels: 0.00%

We asked readers about their bandwidth. Here were the responses.

- DSL or Cable: 42.31%
- 56k: 38.46% (will download larger files)
- T1 or corporate LAN: 11.54%
- 56k: 7.69% (won't download larger files

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic will present a writing challenge as an open contest to writers who wish to test their abilities. If you've never written a creative sentence, or if you have fifty books in print, you are welcome to enter. You know the cliché: "practice makes perfect." Although we are not prepared to go that far, we believe practice makes us better. This is particularly true when we submit what we have written for others to read. And who knows? Maybe these little challenges will offer a little inspiration to someone pinned under writer's block.

Deep Magic will select a small number of the most interesting submissions each month and publish them in the following issue. To submit, please attach your document as a MS Word compatible file and email it to writingchallenge@amberlin.com. If you are unable to submit via email, then what are you doing reading an e-zine? In order for your submission to be considered for publication, we request that you send it by email no later than the 20th of each month.

If you submit to the writing challenge, we will presume we have the right to publish your writing. Unfortunately, we cannot offer pay as compensation, but we can offer you the chance to brag to your friends, spouses, significant others, and parents if you find your words in print. We will withhold you name upon your request. (Or maybe you've always wanted to be known by a bizarre pseudonym?)

Good luck, and we look forward to reading your submissions.

June 2002 Challenge

On the cover of our premier issue, you will find an outstanding illustration by Jonathon Earl Bowser titled, A Dark Knight. His interview and samples of his work are found within this issue, starting on page 6. The challenge is to write a paragraph, chapter, short story, or poem about that illustration in 500 words or less. It can be descriptive, narrative, or any other format you choose. Be creative (sending us a sentence with "a dude on a horse" will probably not make it past our astute editorial panel).

Wizard Auditions
by J.T. Slane

"And why does it have to be a wizard?" Bob asked, thrumming his fingers on the desk. "Why not a clever talking cat or a frog that burps riddles? It could be anything or anyone? You're limiting yourself."

"I'm writing a high fantasy novel, not a new spin on Alice in Wonderland. Burping riddles, I mean really! If you're going to make stupid suggestions..." Robert quieted and massaged his aching temples for a moment. He leaned back in his chair, listening to the springs squeak and groan. The air conditioner whined and kicked on, sending a cool draft down on the cozy den. South Carolina summers – it was only eight-thirty and the A/C was rattling awake already.

Bob sat across the desk from Robert, dangling his leg over the arm of the stuffed leather chair. "You haven't had your coffee yet this morning, so I'll forgive you. Look Robert, you've got a whole teeming world trapped inside your head. It's brilliant, I'm telling you. Lots of possibilities. How many books do you think your main plot can sustain?"

"It's an epic fantasy," Robert replied. He scratched the beard gathering beneath his jowls. "I'm thinking five books. It'll kill me to write it all, but…"

"You've got to get it out before your brain buckles under the load. How much have you written so far?"

"Only the first chapter. It's a little slow going at first, but it'll heat up fast. The problem is, I'm trapped. I need a wizard to mentor my protagonist."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Why?"

"Hello, Bob? This is fantasy fiction we're talking about. It's part of the device of the story. Luke Skywalker had Obiwan. Frodo had Gandalf. I need an archetype. All the great ones use it."

"Why?"

Robert flung a pencil at Bob. It bounced off his chest and dropped onto the carpet with a little thump. Bob flinched and straightened up, holding out his hands as if to ward off more blows. "Really, Robert, you need to control your temper. I'm trying the Socratic method on you."

You say you need a wizard because they're an archetype. Why don't we hold an audition for one?

"Spare me – I went to the Citadel, not Harvard. It's not one of the ivory towers."

"Well this isn't any sort of tower…blue, green, or gray. It's a one-story den; although it is a little brown around the edges." Bob looked askance at the crumpled paper and empty Jell-O pudding cups.

"So what's your point? I need a wizard, not an existential Greek philosopher."

Bob scooted off the stuffed chair and started pacing. "I'm trying to help you analyze the situation. You've got to ask these questions. You have a fantastic continent mapped out with very creative cultures. The politics are astounding. The magic system you invented is really first rate. No one's ever done it before. There are good guys, bad guys, an evil force that wants to control the world. You say you need a wizard because they're an archetype. Why don't we hold an audition for one?"

"What?"

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Fantasy and Clichés

by Robin Hobb

http://www.robinhobb.com

Anyone who has not sat down with a copy of Diana Wynne Jones' A Tough Guide to Fairyland should immediately do so. In it, you will find a complete and deserved shredding of all the fantasy clichés and tropes that have ever been inflicted on a reader. If you've written any fantasy at all, at some point your cheeks will burn even as you laugh out loud at whatever writing sin you've blithely committed.

That said, I think there is still a valid place in fantasy, or in any kind of writing, for the cliché. Throw them all out, resolve never to commit any of them, and what do you have left? No boy-meets-girl, or boy-meets-boy or boy-meets-alien, because all of those have been done to death. No sacrificing-all-for-duty, no whore-with-a-heart-of-gold, no kitchen-girl-as-disguised-princess, no three-wishes-only, no magic-ring, no Elven-warriors. To ban all clichés is a bit like banning all wheels from vehicles. Fantasy, and I'd venture to say all literature, travels on clichés.

> I think there is still a valid place in fantasy, or in any kind of writing, for the cliche.
>
> --Robin Hobb

Why? Because they speak to us. Cut down to the heart of them, and you hear the truths that keep all of us going in the face of discouragement and misfortune. In our hearts, all of us need to believe that goodness is rewarded, that each of us is special in a unique, if hidden way, that kindness can be found in strangers, and that heroes may wear any of a thousand faces. You'll find all of those clichés in the Bible, in Shakespeare, in the Illiad and in Pokemon cartoons. You can't scoff at the kitchen-maid-is-a-princess unless you are also willing to throw out the madman-is-a-genius movies and the poor-boy-makes-good newspaper stories. And lest I sound too Goody-Two-Shoes, let me hasten to point out that all the dark clichés are there as well: that evil can wear a fair face, that strangers can be dangerous, that power corrupts and that strength does not always equal right. These are the truths that stories have always conveyed, and conveying these truths might actually be why stories were invented. If Red-Riding-Hood had not spoken to a stranger, if Goldilocks had not strayed from the path, if Cinderella had not persevered in her duty despite mistreatment, there would not have been a lesson learned via those old clichéd stories.

Books by Robin Hobb

The Farseer Trilogy
- Assassin's Apprentice
- Royal Assassin
- Assassin's Quest

The Liveship Traders
- Ship of Magic
- Mad Ship
- Ship of Destiny

The Tawny Man
- Fool's Errand

That said, bear in mind that simply using a cliché doesn't make a good story. Unless you can clothe it afresh and make it yours and set it dancing to your own unique song, then it's just Cinderella all over again. And we all know that story by heart already.

And it is important to differentiate between a cliché and plagiarism. Think of a cliché as a stripped down plot element. A cliché is a simple man asked to do a difficult deed for altruistic reasons. Plagiarism is a short, furry footed Corbette being asked to take the Necklace of Ability to the Volcano of Fate by the mage Sindrof. The first is a story that anyone can clothe afresh. The second is a reader's worst nightmare.

Interview with Robin Hobb

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?

The Internet has changed how I interact with readers and how I work with my editors, but it has been a very gradual change.

I used to finish writing a book, print out a copy, take it to a copy service and have several copies made. One stayed in my files and one each went to the editors and my agent. Editors made suggestions on those copies, mailed them back to me, I made changes on those copies, retyping pages if they had lots of changes, and mailed it back. It was a slow process that, in some ways, allowed more time for thoughtful consideration. Waiting to get a book back can provide time for an author to gain some distance from the work and see it with fresh eyes when it returns.

I now finish writing a book and immediately submit it as a series of files sent by e-mail. A hard copy follows by post. With one of my editors, we do all of our editing together via e-mail. The other employs a mixture of both, with a paper copy of suggested changes followed up by e-mail discussions of the changes. Changes are made much more swiftly, and the process of dealing with different electronic versions can be confusing as page numbers shift. There have been difficulties with settling on software that is compatible with both the UK and US publisher. So, I think it is still in an evolutionary stage. But that is true of everything about the Internet, right?

With readers, the Internet had very little impact until I put up a website. The website has facilitated contact with readers to an immense degree. I get a steady stream of email with comments and questions. I am also able to let readers know, via the site, when new books are coming out, where shorter works are being published, and plans for conventions, readings and signings. I've greatly enjoyed the increased contact with readers. I don't do a lot of conventions, compared to some writers I know, so I don't get as much face to face contact, perhaps. But via the site and email, I can communicate with readers in a way that I can fit around my writing schedule. Currently, I try to send some sort of a reply to every e-mail I receive. I now have a block of time in my day that is devoted to answering e-mail. That time used to be devoted to writing.

There is one other downside to this, but it is the same one that I've encountered at signings or readings. That is, for some readers, the contact with the author pops the fiction bubble. Some people come to signings very enthusiastic, full of questions about how I write or what my plans are for my next book. Others come and listen, but at some point, perhaps when I'm signing the book, I think I sense a bit of disappointment. I'm not nearly as interesting a person as my characters are, nor as charismatic. That is true of me in person, and also true of me answering an email. At some point, the reader realizes, "I loved that world, I knew those characters, and now I'm talking to the person who wrote that all down, and I'm confronting the fact that it is 'just a story.' I can't go there, I can't live there, I can't ever meet those people in the flesh." It can be a disappointing moment. So perhaps some readers should ask themselves, "Do I really want to meet the author?"

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published

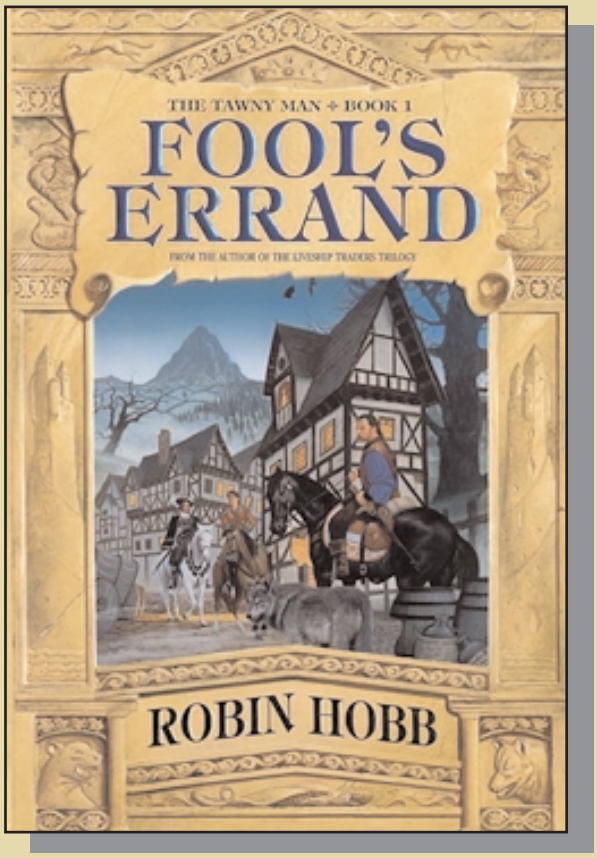
This would work very well as an example of how doing things wrong can still work out right. My first efforts at SF and fantasy were short works. I'd written a short story for an anthology called AMAZONS!, edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. The anthology went on to win the World Fantasy Award that year. In my introduction to the story, I'd mentioned that I was working on a novel about the same two characters. And I was, at the time. But I lost energy and put all the pieces of the novel in a box and set them aside.

About a year and a half later, I moved to the Seattle area where Jessica Salmonson lived and made phone contact with her. She mentioned that an editor, Terri Windling at Ace, had really enjoyed the anthology and my story, and had wondered if I'd ever done anything with the book I was working on. At that point, I finally took action, contacting Terri with an outline and several sample chapters. She bought the book Harpy's Flight, and it was the first of several books I sold to Ace.

Had Jessica not mentioned Terri's comment to me, I doubt I would have ever gotten around to submitting the novel. I was still working hard at finding out how difficult it is to write a good short story, and pouring all my energy into that.

Moral of the story: Writing isn't enough. You have to submit the work.

(You can visit Robin's website at: http://www.robinhobb.com)



Robin Hobb was born in California in 1952, grew up in Fairbanks, Alaska and presently resides in Tacoma, Washington. When not writing, she volunteers in the local school library. Hobbies include refereeing between the ferret and the cats and intending to mow the front lawn. For more information or to contact the writer, visit her website at Robinhobb.com.

Refuge
by Reuben C. Fox

The fire burned low, crackled--the only sound in the night beyond Pastor Johnson. His eyes were distant, reflective beneath the starlight. Ruth held her five year-old daughter in her arms. Wendy was unusually quiet, listening to the thick voice of the Pastor.

"Can you imagine the sight?" the Pastor continued. "Every tribe gathered and camped beneath the standard of its people: Judah beneath the lion; Ephraim beneath the bull; Zebulon beneath the sailing ship; Benjamin beneath the wolf; Levi beneath the two stones . . . all the others. They had been brought across the Red Sea on dry land and camped beneath the stars, just like us.

"And God was with them, for His power shone in the day by a column of smoke and by a pillar of fire at night! Think of it! They had been brought from an evil land and were going to a land of promise. It has always been so. The peaceful and those who seek to do what's right have always been led away, out of evil, into their own land."

He stood up and walked over to Wendy. He studied her face for a moment. "Like us, hmm?"

Wendy nodded a little and Ruth squeezed her tight and kissed her.

Pastor Johnson turned and looked across the rest of the Parish. "But where do you flee to when the whole earth is full of evil? We lift our hands against no one. Where can we go to live our lives in peace, free from the combines and mobs and the plagues? Who can tell me?"

Wendy's hand shot up, as did every child's.

"Where?"

"Mars," a boy across the fire said. "Mars is a desert like the Holy Land. That's where we can go."

Mars is a desert like the Holy Land. That's where we can go.

"Yes!" his voice almost trembled. "And a ship is on its way for us. No one knows about it but us. It'll arrive day after tomorrow, maybe the next day, and we've got to reach the Mars launch enclave by tomorrow night, and like the children of Israel, cross the dark sea to our promised land.

He smiled, his eyes glistening in the firelight. "Now, It's late. No hymn tonight. Say a most fervent prayer as families that we may reach our new home in safety. God bless us. Good night."

The congregation dispersed, but in a lingering silence. Pastor Johnson watched them quietly. Families banded together, holding each other close as they walked to their tents, speaking only in whispers. Ruth let Wendy down. She ran up to the fire.

"Just look," Ruth called after her. "Don't throw anything in, honey."

Pastor Johnson left the line of families and crossed over to her. "You doing all right?" he asked.

Ruth nodded but couldn't keep the tears away. "I . . . I know Steve's at peace, now--experiencing new things, and loved ones waiting for him." She shook her head, her fingers at her lips, looking away from the Pastor. "I miss him so much."

"We all do."

"I know. And I know you miss your wife. Not too close to the fire, Wendy!" she watched her daughter, face underlit by the flames, crouching, staring.

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Jonathon Earl Bowser

Age: 39
Residence: Canada
Marital Status: Married
Children: None
Hobbies: Writing
Favorite Book or Author: Joseph Campbell
Started Painting In: 1980
Artist Most Inspired By: Alphonse Mucha
Mediums You Work In: Oil paint
Schools Attended: Alberta College of Art and Design
Website URL: www.JonathonArt.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I suppose I was born with a creative temperament and an inclination to solitude; I was fortunate enough to discover art-making when I was only 8 years old and I've always known that was what I should be doing.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I call my work "Mythic Naturalism"; these images are looking for the Mysterious Beauty beyond the superficial appearance of the world, seeking new revelations of a simple truth: the Mystery of Nature and the Cosmos, and the Mystery of the Feminine, are the same...

Q: What do you find most influences your work?
A: Science and philosophy books, nature, my wife, everywhere.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I simply want to explore my own few acres of the universal dreamscape. I am influenced and inspired by my own peculiar view of the world - a personal need to create reverential images of the unseen, Vivifying Spirit of the natural world.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: My work has been published many times, but I really feel that my most significant success is understanding my work within a larger historical context, realizing that the same Mystery I seek has been sought by artists for thousands of years, and having been fortunate enough to pursue that vision every day in my studio.

THE KING OF WOLVMEADOW

by Peter Dahl

"Pass me salt, lad, would you? Ah good… no meat I ever ate tasted any good without a hand of salt. And I been all over the Clovershir, and all. Fine lamb they got on the Clover Downs, but ain't no good without me salt. No matter, even if you got a fancy plate of pork at the Clover Hall, covered all in brown gravy or stewed applesauce and cinnamon. Salt you'd still be needing to make it right.

"Mmm, that's the stuff. Now, how 'bout you pull me another of the finest, lad? And then I'll give what's been promised. Pull up you're chairs me bucks! That's right, old Hamann here be paying young master Brecht the promised fee. I ain't see why you lot can't listen in. Mmm… Nnns good sausage…

"Thanking you, young Brecht. Right polite of you. With salt it's always proper to have something to quench the thirst with. And this place got the best honey-ale, I swear. – Ahhhff. – Well then, I can see by your keen faces that I'd better start, or you'll likely off with what's left of me meal and drink, hey?

"Don't rightly see why you want me telling tales of the Wolvmeadow again though. Just cause they're a wild and rowdy lot? Trebridge on Ell got some fascinating stories too. Ach… Never mind…

"You bucks all no doubt heard about the first King of Wolvmeadow? Well, all excepting maybe you young Brecht. Forget what you all been told, you hear? I got the real story. Not what them rhyming bards spin for pampered ears, just the simple plain of it. You all interested?

I got the real story. Not what them rhyming bards spin for pampered ears, just the simple plain of it. You all interested?

"Course you are! Just have me another swig – fhhhh – throat can get mighty dry sitting around here.

"Well now, back in them days there weren't much on the Wolvmeadow. Pretty Bimsley over Wolvmeadow ain't been built yet, and even here in the Clovershir there weren't much besides the Clover Hall of King Ellert. Men were only new to these places, and all the lands had other names. The sprites of forest, hill and water ruled alone. And they had no hamlets and towns, nor city or castle that we'd recognise as such. But they thrived here, all the same.

"Those thieving minstrels would have you believe then, that the Wolvmeadow was conquered by the sword of Grenir, the first King of the Wolvmeadow. They'd say he cut his self into dominance over everything that walked and stalked the fields. His blue eyes compelled all to his will. But that ain't completely so. I know better. Might alone, won no kingdom.

"That's the truth! A Kobold sprite, name of Rekke Redmantle, told it to me as much. Ran into him in Whitwade over the Saal. Funny little blighter he was, and odd too. Best stay away from such creatures if you don't know what you're doing. But this one liked to entertain small crowds at the Whitwade Hog, so that was quite safe. Good stories he got though. – Hey – I can see you grinning over there, behind Werth. Bold you are, Gart Twoberries. What? You don't believe me? Go on to Whitwade lad, and ask the inn-keep at The Hog then. You'll see who's right!

"Now – if you'd let me continue paying me fee?

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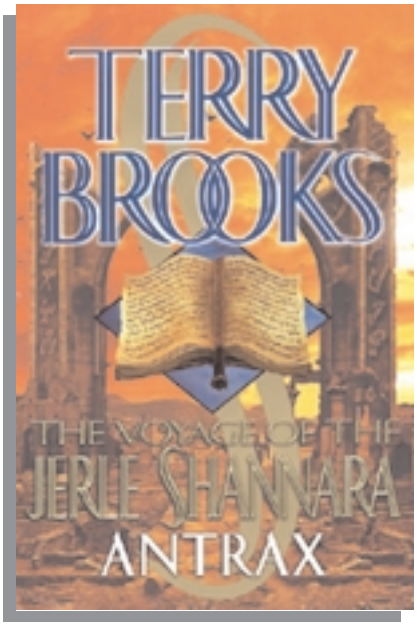
Book Review: The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara, Antrax

By Brendon Taylor

Twenty-five years ago, in 1977, Ballantine Books put a vibrant, compelling fantasy adventure into print under its fantasy/science fiction label, Del Rey. Terry Brooks' Sword of Shannara was a huge success then, and it has earned a reputation and following that has carried nine subsequent Shannara novels to the best sellers list… and counting. The latest installment in the Shannara canon is book two of The Voyage of Jerle Shannara trilogy, Antrax.



Readers familiar with the Shannara novels past will have little trouble identifying most of the characters in Antrax with their predecessors. Walker, a repeat from The Heritage of Shannara series, continues in the role of mysterious druid. Other incarnates include members of the Ohmsford family, a son of Leah, Elven Hunters, a surly dwarf and a group of Rovers. A few new additions, or twists on previous characters, add new spice to the familiar and savory Shannara stew, including a complicated seeress and a compelling shape-shifter. Perhaps the two most significant departures from the previous Shannara works are the setting and the primary antagonist.

For the first time, the druid leads a band of willing cohorts to confront danger beyond the Four Lands. On an airship flown by Rovers, Walker leads his group across an ocean to a remote land and to a mysterious place called Castledown. For a 454 page synopsis of how the party reaches Castledown, see The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara, Ilse Witch.

The primary antagonist is a creature of a science fiction nature, Antrax. The purpose of the mission slowly ravels away as the quest for "Magic Books" becomes an uphill sprint for survival and escape. The immense power of Antrax scatters the group, and the trailing Ilse Witch pursues the party in an attempt to beat Walker to the magic. Her role as antagonist becomes shadowed by revelations of who she is and her brother's attempts to lead her into redemption.

ANTRAX
by Terry Brooks

Rating: PG-13
Grade: B

The pacing of Antrax begins at a sprint and speeds up throughout the book with only a few breaks. The carnage, which began at the end of Ilse Witch, continues into and throughout Antrax on a level that reminded me of The Elfstones of Shannara. Just as all of the loose threads of the various storylines reach their conclusions, and some begin to weave back together, Brooks releases a few surprises.

On a technical level, Brooks is a master. His art of storytelling is at the top of the genre, which is the strength of the piece. Shannara fans will certainly not be disappointed. Fantasy fans unfamiliar with Brooks' work, if there are any, might do better to back up to the beginning and start with The Sword of Shannara.

Specific strengths of Antrax include:

• Strong, compelling female characters. Brooks has often portrayed complex and interesting female characters in his novels, and those found in Antrax are very well conceived. Not only are the strong, competent, and integral to the story, but they become real through the struggles and flaws each has.

• The incorporation of science fiction. Technology is well-used and a fresh twist to the Shannara legacy. Throughout the previous nine Shannara books, Brooks has alluded to the post-apocalyptic history behind the four lands. Antrax blends that history into the present with a science fiction bend that is delicately woven into the primarily fantasy setting. In the end, the story is flavored with a Matrix feel.

• The element of redemption. Two characters in particular battle not only the imposing forces at Castledown, but also internal struggles over errors and character flaws and the need to make restitution for choices made in Ilse Witch. They become very compelling as they seek redemption by going into the heart of Castledown. This is just one example of excellent character building in Antrax.

• Truhls Rock (the shapeshifter). This character, and Brooks' extrapolation of the idea of shapeshifters in his world, add the most intriguing element to the story. A blend of man and magic, Truhls is connected to Bek Ohmsford by a special bond that was formed before Bek could walk.

Specific weaknesses of Antrax:

• Two glaring omissions. There are two scenes that should have made final print in this series that were somehow left out. First, in Ilse Witch, mountains of words were devoted to the manner and method of flying airships, and the particular skill of the Rovers flying the Jerle Shannara in combat. However, there were never any confrontations between the Jerle Shannara and the Black Moclips (the ship, the Ilse Witch, and her crew of Mwellrets used to track the druid's journey), except one collision in the fog. The collision seemed overly coincidental, but the real weakness was the omission of an air battle between the two ships. In Antrax, the one omission that robbed readers of an incredible scene was the non-confrontation between Truhls and the caull (an incarnated jachyra created by the Ilse Witch). The fight was perfectly set up, but never came to be.

• The copper-skinned natives. The group of adventurers, after scattered by Antrax in their first attempt to enter castledown, meets up with natives to the area. Another convenient coincidence is that the natives happen to speak an ancient dialect that the dwarf understands. Until then, the dwarf was short on purpose, aside from nostalgia; so, perhaps that was Brooks' motivation for having him be able to communicate with the natives. Yet, the real problem here was that the natives were two-dimensional, and seemed present only to add to the body count.

• The cost of the mission. It would be premature to declare the mission a failure after book two in a trilogy, but at this point, the mission to Castledown seems complete and the cost, in terms of loss of life, is immense. Brooks has a way of leaving the pot boiling between books, and he certainly has not failed in doing that with Antrax. It will be interesting to see how he justifies the mission in book three.

Rating: **PG-13** for fantasy violence and mature themes.
Grade: **B**

Fans might be interested in reading an online interview with Terry Brooks about The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara series, which includes brief information that another Shannara trilogy will follow. Read the review at http://www.randomhouse.com/features/shannara/interview.html.

By signing up with the following site, readers will receive a short story by Terry Brooks that corresponds with The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara. http://www.randomhouse.com/features/shannara/email.html.

Finally, Terry Brooks' official website, which includes book signing tour information, can be found at http://www.terrybrooks.net.

Landmoor
by Jeff Wheeler

I

He had been confined to a silent world of sleep. An engulfing blue light surrounded him that maintained the awful prison. He wanted to be rid of it, to sit and stretch and walk about. But the bond was powerful, and he couldn't rouse himself from it. There was no hunger, no sense of thirst. No weariness either. No, that had abandoned him a long time ago. If he ever did awaken, he knew he would never need to sleep again. He would never dare sleep again. Or was this blue existence really his own death – this gradual feeling of loss and timelessness? Thoughts formed and then scattered. The only real thing was the blue light – the source of the prison he had chosen for himself. What a foolish choice.

And in an instant, it changed. The blue light winked out.

He blinked. Wincing at the colors and shades streaking across his eyes, he realized he could see again. Greens and browns and grays – rich earthy colors. The blue light had vanished. His insides thrilled with the freedom. For a moment, the barrage of sounds disoriented him. He was in the woods surrounding the watchpost. Wasn't he? The shrill chatter of a jackdaw echoed, winging its way through the grove. Fat bumblebees spun in wide circles nearby. And a small waterfall! A melodious churning waterfall. It took a moment for him to realize that marsh water had seeped into his boots, making his feet cold. The discomfort of it was new, invigorating. The Everoot surrounded him, growing across the rocks and trees, wet and glistening like damp moss. Memories flooded him as well, thoughts sticking together and holding. Excitement surged through his stomach. He was alive again! And then he felt the presence of Forbidden magic coming nearer.

As he turned around, he discovered the woman moving through the woods. She was blurred, distorted by the crackling sheets of blue lightning flashing off the canopy of wetland trees – a wall of magic separating them. The roar of the magic swept through the marshy grass as it fought to keep her out. A feeling of darkness and fear settled into his bones at seeing her. A smell also – a stinging smell that reminded him of cinders and dead flesh. He knew in an instant she was an intruder to the warding. Tingles of fire gathered through his fingers as he summoned earth magic from the spongy mat of grass and moss, breathing it from the mud and stones. He inhaled its cloying smell. Again the thought came to him. He was here for a reason. She was an intruder. He – the guardian. He remembered nothing else. Summoning the rush of the magic to aid him, he raised his arms to unleash it on her.

In the blink of a moment, the magic abandoned him, leaving only the scent of smoke. It was like a silver candlesnuffer quenching a taper. He tried to summon the earth magic again, but it slipped from his fingers like water. The warding was also gone. Panic seized him as he realized that no barrier separated her from him. The blur of the warding was gone and he could see her clearly now – dark sleek hair and an ageless face. Her eyes were depthless and as dark as her hair and robes. She was his height and moved with a suppleness that defied the tangle of the woods. She reeked of Forbidden magic. "Who are you?" he demanded, gagging on the terror rising in his chest. He had been bound for this moment – for this moment only! To defend the warding – to stop anyone from seizing the Everoot.

No answer.

"Who are you?" He squinted against the thickening shadows. He watched as the afternoon sunlight faded and blackness gathered in its wake. The marsh water had soaked through his boots, but he was cold with fear. She opened her hand. A ball of reddish light glimmered against the curtain of long black robes she wore. His eyes went wide, recognizing the shade of the flame. Terror writhed up his throat. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He knew exactly what had come to kill him.

"Yes, you do know what I am," came her whisper, answering his thoughts.

He took a tentative step backwards, waiting with dread for the rush of magic that would destroy him. "How did you find…?"

"I am the one who called you. I am the one who has tamed you. Serve me."

The ground lurched as he fell to his elbows and knees, weeping in shame and loathing. He shook with cold as the marsh water soaked into the rest of his clothes.

* * *

The city of Landmoor hunkered on a wide flat hill overlooking the Shoreland moors. It was an odd-looking hill, a little lopsided on the eastern slant, with teeth-like rows of stone jutting between splotches of green sedge. The fortress-city occupied the summit from end to end, its tall, ridged walls interspersed with dominating watch towers, bastions, and two gatehouses. From the center of town rose the sprawling governor's palace, square and proud, higher than any of the uneven walls. Yet, despite the slouching look which he inwardly admired, Allavin Devers knew that Landmoor was a defensible and well-built keep, one of the strongest in the Kingdom of Dos-Aralon and one of the most remote. He stood just within the fringes of the Shadows Wood, staring across

Click here to continue on page 39

Landmoor is a land rich in imagination. The map below will guide you through this novel as you read it over the next several months. Click anywhere on the map to the left and you will be taken to a larger resolution image on our website. You just may want to print it out for easier reference!

Continued from page 6

"You're getting good at challenging everything I say with a monosyllabic question. Let's hold an audition for a wizard. Let's find one that works or scrub the idea altogether. You've got to write this epic, Robert. It's consuming you."

"I know, I know," Robert replied with a sigh. He squeezed his eyes shut and thought about it.

"Hold an audition, you say? And how do you suggest we go about that?"

Bob picked up the phone and started punching in numbers.

"Who are you calling?"

"New York."

"That's long distance!"

"Do you want to get your wizard or not?" Bob complained. He hiked the receiver up with his shoulder and started pacing. "Yes, Houghton Mifflin. Tolkein estate attorney please. Yes. Thank you." He waited a few moments and looked over at Robert, giving him a wink. There was silence for a few more seconds. "Yes, I'd like to see if Gandalf is available for an audition in a new epic fantasy. Hmm? No, we're not looking for a cameo appearance. He's needed to help jumpstart the story and will appear in….Robert, how many books before you pretend to kill him?"

"At least three," Robert replied, looking at Bob in amazement.

"Yes, he'll be around for three books at least. Maybe do a surprise return down the road. Yes, like he did in Lord of the Rings. I see. Big movie contract underway, you say? Not as bad as the Rankin-Bass cartoon I hope? Really? A trilogy? Who's the director? I don't believe you! Well, that's pretty amazing. Sorry to hear that it won't work out. Thanks again. Goodbye." Bob hung up the phone and shook his head. "Gandalf is booked solid for the next decade or two. We can't wait that long."

Robert scratched his beard again. "I wouldn't want to use him anyway. I mean, come on. If Mithrandir came walking up to my protagonists with a gnarled staff, the readers would groan! He's an archetype. That doesn't mean you copy every wart."

"I see what you're saying. Who are the other fantasy masters then? Let's try Terry Brooks."

"Brooks used Allanon but killed him in Wishsong."

Bob nodded thoughtfully and then brightened. "Then he's unemployed! Excellent. That's a good start." He picked up the phone and quickly dialed some numbers. "Yes, Del Rey books please." He stopped a moment and punched in some more numbers. He listened a moment and then swore. "I hate these directory trees. How do you spell Allanon again?"

"A-L-L-A-N-O-N."

"Oh, I got Alcoholics Anonymous the first time. Let's try this again." More numbers beeped as he pushed them. "Ah, it's ringing. Yes, Allanon. Just the wizard I was looking for…"

"He's a druid!" Robert groaned.

"Oh, sorry, druid. That's right, the Paranor thing. I was wondering if you'd be available for an audition. There's a new epic fantasy underway…yes, I understand that you're dead. Nasty business with that Jachyra. I'm talking about a sort of metaphysical reincarnation here. Taking on a new form with a new name. What kind of magic can you do? Um-hmmm. Very interesting. Can you do anything else besides the blue flame and speak to the dead. Yes…yes…wow! Brooks never even hinted that you could do that! Amazing! Oh really? Can you fax over your resume or something? Oh, it's still in the Druid Vaults and you're disembodied. Can't go there without being summoned. I see. Happens all the time, I understand. So are you interested in auditioning?" Bob covered the mouth piece of the phone and nodded vigorously. "I think we've got him!" Suddenly wrinkles lined his brow. "Oh, you do? I see. I understand completely. Yes, I agree -- lawyers deserve to be disemboweled. It was good talking to you. Talk to you later, Al. Goodbye."

"What happened?" Robert asked, leaning forward, interested.

"Terry Brooks is a lawyer. I'd forgotten that." He rubbed his chin and shook his head. "Wrote it into his contract that he could be summoned back as a shade at any time. He'd love the work because he was only really given three books in the role before the…you know…the 'blue mouth-wash' incident with the Jachyra. I'm afraid he's tied up in a never-ending contract with the Shannara project. He would have been good, too. I had no idea he sang tenor."

"We're not doing so well. Two for two are locked into contracts." Robert leaned back in the chair and it squeaked again. "What about David Eddings? Belgareth the Sorcerer. I wonder what he's up to."

"Good one! Let's give him a try." Bob beeped the phone buttons again. "He's also with Del Rey. Let's get this right…B-E-L-G…there we go…it's ringing. Oh, it's his voicemail. Give me a pencil and paper." Robert slid over a sketchpad and scrambled in his desk for a pen. Bob cocked the phone in his ear and scribbled down some numbers. "He's in Jamaica right now. Let's try him at this number."

Bob let it ring for a moment. "Hello, is this Belgareth? Hello? I can barely hear you over the music." He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece again. "He's got Bob Marley on the stereo so loud I can't….Oh yes, that's much better. I can hear you now. Listen, Mr. B – or do you prefer Mr. Wolf still? Excellent, Mr. B. We're looking for an archetype to be in a new epic fantasy and your name came up. Yes, I've already tried Tolkein's office. Of course we went there first. No need to get touchy about it! Dress code is very flexible. Have you picked the wardrobe yet, Robert?"
Robert shrugged.

"Negotiable, Mr. B. Everything is negotiable. I understand that tight collars make you itch. You've lost the beard? Oh, you mean you're sporting a goatee now. Hmmm. You were the one who started the goatee trend…I see." Bob rolled his eyes. "Do you care if he has a goatee instead of a full beard, Robert? I don't think that will be an issue. Tell me a little more about your magic system. The Word and Will…yes…yes…I know it can do that. Yes, I've read them all. My favorite? Look, we're talking about a new project here. You won't be known as Belgareth in this world. What do you mean why not? It's a different author. A different setting. I see." Bob held the phone away from his ear. "He says his powers don't work on any other world. I'm sorry for bothering you, Mr. B. Sounds like you're pretty committed to the Eddings universe. I understand." He held the phone away from his ear again. "His daughter might be available. Do you want to try Polgara?"

"Tempting," Robert replied, "But I'd probably rather work with an unknown. Ditch him."

"Sorry, Mr. B, I've got to run. I hope you enjoy Jamaica. Good bye."

Bob hung up the phone and started pacing again. "What a piece of work. He said that Eddings is thinking about revisiting the Belgariad plotline again. He was a little leery of making a long-term commitment to anyone else right now. That's three for three. Who else can we try? Le Guin has lots of wizards in Earthsea, I wonder if we can borrow one of hers?"

"Her books are too short. I need someone who can stand a thousand page book and keep coming back. Someone young."

"That counts out Merlin."

Robert nodded. "I don't think he ever gets a breather. I mean, come on, he's the original archetype."

"What about a pope instead of a wizard?" Bob suggested.

"Who would want to read about a magic pope? Besides, there is no main religion in my world."

"We've got to think of something." He snapped his fingers. "Belgareth's idea!"

"Use Polgara?"

"No, an archetype based on a woman instead of an aging man!"

Robert thought about it a moment. "That has some potential. Who else has done it?"

"Morgana from the Arthurian legends comes to mind."

"So it has been done, but rarely. Women are usually damsels or Delilahs. But what if I use a younger woman to play the wizard's role? You know, this has some potential. I could grab an unknown, so nobody could accuse me of copying them."

"You all copy each other!"

"I know that, but it's professional pride. This has some interesting possibilities. What should she look like?"

"She'd have to be beautiful or no one would take her seriously. An old crone wouldn't do the trick here. That's more than an archetype – it's cliché."

"But not too young or they won't take her seriously either. She's got to be smart, cunning, and…ageless in a way. Any ideas?"

"There was a girl in high school," Robert muttered softly, sinking back into his chair. "Her name was Maureen."

"Maureen? What an awful…"

"Named after her grandmother, you idiot. She was teased because of her name, but she always took it with a smile. A smile that said she knew something they didn't. She was short – I mean really short – and she had long dark hair." He thought back on her and sighed. "Maureen."

"You've got to change her name."

"I know. I will." He tapped his lip for a moment. "She'll be from the wizarding city in my world. Someone who travels the land, looking for the protagonist. Not a love interest. A mentor, a manipulator. He'll trust her at first and then distrust her. And then trust her again."

"This is good, Robert. But she needs a name."

"How about…Moiraine."

Bob nodded slowly. "Very French. I like it."

Robert dragged the mouse over and opened the file marked Chapter Two: Strangers.

"Thank you, Bob."

"You're welcome, Robert."

The End

Continued from page 10

"She's such a handful. I . . . I just can't keep up with her. Steve and I used to take turns staying up at night to make sure she didn't just run off. She has, you know. No fear, no understanding of how terrible the world has become. And now I have to do it all, and I never sleep. I'm just so tired. I don't have any reserves, anymore. I feel like an old woman." She stopped, looking down. "I don't mean to complain."

"I didn't take it that way. I'm sure I can get you some help. We can rotate among the families to spell you off. Take Wendy back to your tent. I'll sit outside for four hours tonight then wake you. We'll get things organized by tomorrow night. Sound all right?"

Relief blossomed. All Ruth could do was nod. "I'll get her," she said. "Wendy? Come on honey. Come on. Get back from the fire! It's time to go to bed. Wendy?!"

* * *

The copters came around for another pass, a hodgepodge of refurbished, olive military units and a few stuttering, ancient bubble-heads.

Carrying her daughter, Ruth fled across the debris of the camp. She could hear the distant stuttering of automatics and occasional explosions of everything from Molotov cocktails to scatter grenades. People were running everywhere. Too many of them caught the fire from above. Another pass and the bikes would come. Wendy struggled in her arms.

"I can't let you down!" she all but screamed at the girl and nearly stumbled over a body. She wouldn't look . . . she wouldn't look . . . a child's corpse. Her throat collapsed in revulsion.

One of the bubble-heads screamed overhead. The spray of near misses spattered the ground around her. She ducked down, pulled Wendy in, and then looked up. The pilot was a Wrapper. The tight cloth strips clung to skin that was hopelessly festering underneath. He wore dark glasses and craned his head out the open side, looking back at her. He had no lips.

Ruth turned aside, looking for shelter.

"Dear Father," she cried. "Please . . ."

Wendy was bucking again.

"I raise my hand against no one," she hissed under her breath. "I will love all Your children . . . all Your creations!" it was half prayed half a reminder to her. "I must not kill! Will You not deliver us, that we might reach the Mars enclave?!"

The copters roared in again and she could hear the blatting buzz of the bikes. One rasped past her. The biker was bare from the waist up. Tattooed pentagrams covered him. He was nearly dark with them. He cruised past her then spun around. She turned and sprinted for the trees. The bike grated as the driver opened the throttle. She ran faster . . . almost there . . .

Just then the sonic went off. Ruth panicked. The combine had sonics!

The world turned head over heels. Ruth fell to her knees then pitched into the bushes, paralyzed. The branches scraped her face but she could do nothing to fend them off. Wendy scampered out of her numb arms like a drunken monkey.

The bike pulled up behind her. The motor backfired among the gunshots. She couldn't see the biker--could only see the ground. Dirt clogged her eyes.

They watered and stung, but she couldn't close them.

"Get away, Wendy!" she cried out, but the words were only a gurgling grunt. "God . . . " She finished the plea in her mind. "My God . . . Help us!"

The effects of the sonic smothered darkness down upon her.

* * *

Ruth stirred. It was cool. She listened intently. Not even the crickets chirped, but then she had not heard any for days. The flies had done away with the crickets, or so some of the men had said. They had even done away with the chiggers. She smiled for a moment. Silver lining to every cloud.

Fly swarms! They were worse than the gangs were and then, she thought ruefully, they were supposed to be much worse than the chiggers had ever been.

The silence drew on and on. The air itself was utterly still.

Ruth let her breath out, not realizing that she had been holding it. Sparkles of dizziness whirled before her eyes for a moment.

"Wendy?" she lifted her head. The girl sat a meter away in a narrow break in the heavy undergrowth. She clutched her doll and looked carefully at her mother. Ruth tried moving her fingers. Sensation was returning. She pulled herself up on her elbows and saw the biker, dead at her feet.

The smell of ashes stung her nostrils. The fires of the morning's attack only smoldered. Carefully, Ruth pushed herself up, fending branches past her face as she backed out. She had made it farther into the brush, than she had remembered. The edge of the clearing lay several meters behind her, enough, apparently, to have hidden them from everyone except the biker who had chased them. His corpse sprawled across a thorny branch. Had someone killed him before he had been able to reach her? And, if so, how? She could see no bullet wounds. She turned away quickly.

"The men," Wendy said. "They were everywhere, mommy."

Ruth picked up her daughter and held her.

"Shhh," she rocked her. "It's all right. They're gone now."

"I wanted them to stay," Wendy said, pushing her mother back and looking into her eyes--those deep, blue, wide eyes. "They had lights here," she pointed to her forehead. "They were bright, mommy! It hurt to look. They wanted us to come home with them, but I couldn't move, and I guess they couldn't see us--they never came very close."

Ruth looked in puzzlement at her daughter.

"And they stood up high and . . ."

"Honey, they were bad men."

"No, mommy. They were good men. And they stood up high . . ."

"Well they're gone now," she pulled Wendy close again. Her eyes stung with wonder and hurt and gratitude all at once. "Dear Father," she said, then paused. "Close your eyes, honey. Remember what we said when we pray?" Wendy clamped her eyes tightly. Ruth went on. "Father, I thank You for saving us. Please, please help us to find our way to the launch base so we can travel to Mars and build our new home of peace there."

She held Wendy for a time in the darkness.

"Mommy, I'm hungry." Wendy said. Ruth felt the gnawing in her own stomach. But she knew there would be no food. The combine would have cleaned them out before moving on.

"Do you remember what we said--about some times we would have be like great queens on an adventure and . . .?"

" . . . And not eat?"

"And not eat."

"I don't want to play that, mommy. I'm hungry."

"I know."

"The Pastor has food. Can't we get some from him?"

Ruth took a deep sigh. "Honey, the Pastor is . . . well, listen? Do you hear anyone? I'm sure

he's gone on to the launch site."

"But I saw him over there," she pointed toward the wreckage of a copter.

Wreckage? Ruth stood. Her legs cramped for a moment. She bent forward, fighting the dizziness again.

"See?" Wendy ran toward the downed helicopter.

"No! Wendy--don't!"

"It's here mommy . . ."

Ruth stumbled after her daughter, nearly tripping twice from muscles that objected strenuously to being used.

"It's here! It's here!" she stopped just short of the wreck. "I knew it would be!"

Ruth came up behind her. Pastor Johnson lay beside the ruin. Broken crates of canned food lay strewn about. The clergyman lay among them, strangely serene. His eyes, opened, looked skyward. Ruth could barely see him in the light of the first quarter moon. His expression wore a mixture of confusion and . . . and something she could not quite place. Surprise? Excitement?

"How did you know about the food?"

"The men with the lights. They told me he had food for us. He's happy, now. Is he happy to be with Heavenly Father?" Wendy asked.

"What?"

"Is Pastor Johnson happy, mommy?"

"Yes. Yes. Of course. Come on. Help me pick up some cans."

They worked under a dim, red-orange moonlight. The night was chilled from air still laden with dust from the wars. It was June in Missouri and they had to wear coats. Ruth glanced at the moon. It hung bloody in the sky.

"Put the cans here," Ruth told her. "That's it. Stack them."

As she moved across the field she found far fewer bodies than there should have been. Had everyone escaped? It seemed that the bodies of bikers made up the majority of the dead. She paused to examine one.

His bike was intact. He lay face down in the mud.

Ruth suddenly realized they would have to be out of here by dawn. By then the flies would come. There would be millions of them. They would eat and lay their maggot eggs in whatever they found, living or dead.

Ruth hesitated, then turned the biker over. That was a mistake. She fought the nausea. His face looked collapsed, somehow. It was as though he had run hard into a stone bar at high speed.

What had happened? The sonic should have done in the whole Parish. But here were combine members strewn about and virtually no one else.

Ruth looked for Wendy. Her little one sat beside the cans of food, content for the moment to talk to her doll. Ruth caught only a smattering of words: "Queens . . . Men . . . Light . . . Jesus." Ruth looked back and then all around. Wreckages smoldered everywhere--a dozen, downed copters--a dozen! A stranger coming upon the scene would conclude that it had been the combine that had been ambushed and not the other way around.

Where was the Parish? Had they won, somehow, and left her and Wendy? Had they thought them dead? And then a chilling thought--could they even have seen them in the bush? That must be it. They must have had to escape in a hurry, and not seeing Ruth and Wendy anywhere, must have assumed them dead.

"Mommy? I'm hungry. Can't we eat?"

"I'm coming honey," she glanced down at the ruined face one more time, removed the man's jacket and took it as a blanket for Wendy.

* * *

They rode the dead freeway on a Combine bike. The first light of dawn blistered well into rich rusts and reds. They had covered miles under first light, well beyond the range of any super-swarm of flies that would be drawn to the carnage. Ruth had covered the Pastor with as many coats as she could find. What more could she do? There wasn't time for anything else.

She strained to see ahead. She and Wendy had missed a precious day, unconscious from the sonic. She knew where they were headed: the Mars DCX base, just outside Lexington. They passed beneath a sign that said "Lexington 10 miles" and below that "McDonnell Douglas Research Agency next five exits."

"We're almost here," she shouted back at Wendy. The child clung to her waist with unflinching strength.

Ruth steered around the shells of ambushed cars. All were so badly burned that there was no way of telling what color they had been. She watched carefully for craters in the road or nasty cracks. The over passes ahead looked intact but she slowed down just in case.

"Corporate Offices," read the first exit sign. Ruth slowed to see if she could see any lights. There were rows of glass buildings, but all were dark. No streetlights, either. No sign anything still functioned here. Ruth's spirits took a terrible blow. The harsh life on a terra-formed Mars had to be better than the ravages of an earth in ruin; an earth where terrorists could explode nuclear weapons virtually at will. The worst cases still plagued the Holy Land. By now, Israel and her neighbors fired atomics at each other routinely. Advanced technology hardly ever let anything airborne through--hardly ever. But Tel Aviv had gone up at 5:13 p.m. on the sixth day of Passover.

"Laser Propulsion Research, Exit 1/4 mile." Again, Ruth slowed. No lights. Nothing. "Tracking and Telemetry, Exit 1/4 mile." The great dishes lay silent and dark against the horizon. They peered heavenward, as if waiting. They must be long deaf by now.

In retaliation for the deaths of nearly four million people at Tel Aviv, the Israelis tore down the Dome of the Rock and resurrected the temple of Solomon on its ruins. That was the final indignity to Islam. It united feuding Arab nations and tribes against Israel in a ghastly alliance.

"DCX Construction facility, Exit 1/4 mile." As with the previous exits, only darkness and desertion greeted Ruth's anxious, searching gaze.

Construction of the new temple had concluded before the Great War. Terrorists had expunged nearly a dozen cities of the Satan America with garage built, ground detonated nuclear bombs. The war on terrorism begun at the turn of the century had never really ended. Among the ruined cities were Washington, Boston and New York.

The U.S. had not taken it well. When it was over, a third of the world's population lay dead, and nuclear weapons had not even been the worst part of it. Bacterial warfare had unleashed the most horrible plagues. The Wrappers disease made leprosy look like a mild skin rash. And the flies--well the flies . . .

"Launch Facility, Exit 1/4 mile."

Ruth slowed to twenty-five and took the exit. The road broke up completely in three places. She had to stop at each disruption and manually haul the bike over the debris. By sunrise she was at the gate to the field. Fences had been torn into. Skeletons lay everywhere. Ruth fired the bike again and rode in.

Badly broken asphalt slowed her to a crawl. Rotting crates littered near empty loading docks. Rusted, downed power lines spilled across her path. Ruth's hopes sank lower and lower. At last she pulled the bike around and stopped, facing the freeway. The ruins of hangers towered behind them,

fossils of what they had been but still massive above the flat, Missouri horizon. Ruth studied them, suddenly wary of searching them. Wrappers might use them for shelter.

She stood for a time, listening. The air was utterly silent. No birds punctuated the quiet with their songs and calls--nothing. Wendy climbed off the bike.

"Is this it, mommy?"

Ruth did not answer right away. She wiped the moisture out of her eyes.

"Mommy?"

"Let's eat, honey." Ruth opened two cans of applesauce. She handed one to Wendy and started eating without thinking much.

"Mommy," Wendy said with an edge of reproach. "Don't we give thanks? That's our way."

"What for?" Ruth thought bitterly, but she did not say that aloud. After and uncomfortable moment, she said, "you say it."

Papers skittered by them as the girl began her prayer.

"Dear Heavenly Father. Bless Daddy in Heaven and Pastor Johnson. Bless the poor and give them food and money and life. Bless the men with lights here," she touched her forehead. "Help us to get home and not to Mars."

Ruth stared at her, puzzled. Wendy went on.

"Bless that Jesus comes soon. Bless that we don't get Wrappers. I love You. And the name of Jesus Christ is the Lord. Amen."

She ate voraciously.

Ruth went on with her meal, only half tasting it. Then the ground began to shake.

"Mommy! Jesus comes?"

Ruth grabbed her daughter. She looked east. The sun was dark red on the horizon. After a moment, she shook her head. "Not yet, Wendy. He doesn't come yet . . ."

"Then what . . ."

From behind the row of hangers to the south a great cargo DCX II lifted and hovered perhaps a hundred meters above the ground.

"No!" Ruth started screaming at it, waving her hands. "Don't go! Can't you wait?"

It began a slow ascent.

"No! No! Don't leave us!"

The ship passed through the clouds. They blossomed with the light from its flames. Ruth's yelling fell to a half-hearted pleading and when the trail of smoke and water vapor dwindled to a point she stopped all together. She just stood there, staring up into the muddy sky.

"What are we going to do?" she rubbed her forehead. It was grimy from weeks of travel. Word had come that the Mars colonists, fearful for earth's future, had managed to outfit a DCX II for one last trip to Earth. It would retrieve culture and science chips and give passage to as many people as could be fitted aboard. The trip back would be hard: five and a half months in free fall. But at least the horrors of earth would be beyond them.

Pastor Johnson had worked for the McDonnell Douglas Mars Enterprise. It had been the first private space endeavor of any real scope and had begun decades ago when the first bio-engineered bacteria had been let loose in the Martian atmosphere. By now, the air was still thin, but breathable. A Terran-like ecosystem had begun there. Then, two years before the Great War, colonists from earth had begun a settlement. Once the war started, commerce with Mars had ended--except for this one trip. There was supposed to have been room for the whole Parish to go. Ruth thought back on the scene of the ambush--mostly bikers and few parishioners--only a few. Maybe they had made it.

Why hadn't she checked behind the hangers? She had stopped just short. Why had God failed her? So close!

"Now we can go home, mommy." Wendy said. Ruth turned on her.

"What?!" she exploded. "Don't you understand anything? We can't go home! There is no home. That," she pointed to the dissolving trail of smoke and vapor. "That is our home!"

"That's not what the men with the lights up here said."

"Will you stop it!" she yanked Wendy's hand away from her forehead. "I told you! Those were bad men. They would have killed us if . . ." If what? If whatever it was that had turned the tide of the ambush hadn't happened. Ruth had been unconscious longest, but Wendy--what had Wendy seen?

"Mommy's sorry honey. Tell me about the men."

"They stood up high. And there was fire and one of them talked to me. I thought he was Jesus, but he told me he wasn't."

"What did he say?"

"I told you. We're supposed to go home."

Ruth shook her head. "Home?"

"It's over there, I think. You got off the road."

"What? I don't . . ."

"He said to go down the road and he pointed."

"What happened to everyone else?"

"I, they were . . . the bad men went boom, and they crashed into the ground..." she began running around the field, acting out a drama that was impossible to follow.

"Honey, the people--all our friends. What happened to them?"

"I guess they went home."

Ruth looked up. The trail was drifting and distorted. Home? There was no denying that earth had grown far stranger than she had ever guessed it could.

If only Steve were here! How could he die on her--on them?

"Can we go Mommy?"

"What?"

"I want to go home."

Ruth took a deep sigh. Why not? It wouldn't be long now before they went to their final home anyway. Either the gangs would get them or the flies or the Wrappers. "Okay, Honey." She tossed the can aside. Climb on."

The on ramp was smooth enough that Ruth did not have to get off once. She was in no particular hurry now but lifted the bike up past thirty. She wove carefully around the craters.

Lexington came and went. Like all the other cities and towns it was a smear of ruins and bones. She wondered how much gas there was in the bike. A glance down at the gauge showed less than an eighth of a tank, and judging from how badly the bike smoked that wouldn't last for long.

"Great," she said. Wendy said nothing in reply.

"Independence, 10 miles" Ruth read it aloud. Ahead, the road became treacherous. She slowed down. The next two hours she spent going so slowly that twice she almost gave up the bike. She would have to, soon enough anyway. Why not now?

Through it all Wendy was unusually patient. She never complained. How could that be? So many times a day before the ambush, Wendy would whine or run off. Ruth was a wreck by day's end, for so many days. Maybe it was the adventure of the bike.

* * *

Sunset. The bike lay behind them, maybe as much as a mile behind them. They had left the road once the bike gave out. The gangs traveled the freeways. She considered it lucky that they hadn't run into any. It seemed they were everywhere. They walked near the shoulder. Wendy was skipping off to the side, near the trees.

"Stay near, me Wendy," Ruth called and began closing the distance between them, into the rough. She was so tired--physically, yes. But nothing compared to the dark heaviness that clutched at her breast. All was lost. She shut her eyes while she walked, clenching them tight. Wendy sang off and on. Her thoughts returned to the mystery of the men with the lights in their foreheads. Whatever could they be? It sounded like men in miner's hats. But standing high--with fire all around them--more men in copters with incendiary weapons? What? Ruth looked at the bloody sunset and instead heard silence.

"Wendy," Ruth called, looked aside. Nothing. She stopped dead. "Wendy?" she listened hard. Silence. "Don't play with mommy, honey. Come here."

"She's right here," a croaking voice gurgled out of the trees. Ruth caught her breath. A Wrapper--a Wrapper was holding Wendy by the mouth. "You ought to watch your kid more." The words were oddly skewered. The bandages wrapped tightly, but they oozed with blood. He wore an eye patch. "I presume you want her back? That so?"

Ruth could only nod. Inwardly she pleaded a fervent prayer.

"What you got to trade?"

"Food!" she said. "Two bags in my hands, two on my back."

"Got any drugs?"

Ruth shook her head.

"You wouldn't be lying?"

"I'm a Christian."

He looked at her a moment, then laughed. It gurgled and turned into a cough.

"Take the food," she stepped forward. "It's all I have. Come on honey. Here, I'll put the food down." Then more sharply, "Come on, Wendy."

But the man wouldn't let her go. He came forward like a B-movie mummy.

Dear Father, protect her from the Wrappers, she thought. The man stood less than two feet away. Too close! And he was holding his hand over Wendy's mouth. She was sure to get it.

"Please," Ruth choked back a sob. "Let my little girl go!"

The Wrapper hesitated then loosened his grasp. Wendy leapt free. Ruth took her in her arms. "Why can't you stay close!" she picked her up and started running down the shoulder of the road. "Wendy, honey--you're going to get us killed! Oh, honey why do you do this?"

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Just be quiet," she cut her off.

She ran blindly.

* * *

Night. The moon hung near the western horizon--a horizon unusually bright with some amber glow. Ruth would not let Wendy down for a moment. She was so tired. Her legs ached, her arms ached and her back ached. That was enough. She slowed, looking around her for a thicket where she and Wendy could hide and sleep.

"How you feel honey?" she asked after she had spread the dead biker's coat on the ground for her.

"Okay," Wendy said without conviction. Ruth felt her forehead. It was too soon for the

Wrappers to show. Wasn't it?

"We're almost home, Mommy," Wendy said after a while. She sat leaning up against her looking west and south.

The amber glow was not subsiding. It flickered sometimes. Fire? Was Independence on fire? Gangs? Probably, or worse -- the combines.

"Mommy, I'm hungry."

"I know."

"There's food at home."

"Yes," Ruth assured, cuddling Wendy to her.

"Can we go home tonight?"

"I don't know, honey. Aren't you tired?"

"Yeah. But I'm more hungry than I am tired."

Ruth almost said something about how they would have had something to eat if Wendy had stayed close at hand, but then how many hundreds of times had Ruth warned her? It had been less than a minute; a few seconds! Ruth had only lost herself in thought for a few seconds: ten, twenty cursed, stinking seconds, and their lives were forever changed. No doubt Ruth would get the Wrappers too. So what? Served her right for not keeping Wendy right next to her every second of every day. She couldn't let the guilt out. It ravaged her, replaying the horror over and over. Why couldn't Wendy understand? Wendy always said she would stay close when Ruth chided her, and then minutes, seconds later she would have to chase her. Ruth knew Wendy meant to obey her. She just forgot.

"Try to go to sleep, honey."

"Okay."

Silence.

"Mommy?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't we say prayers?"

Ruth sighed. That was the last thing she wanted right then.

"Shouldn't we?"

"You say it."

"But it's your turn."

"I'm sorry. I'm too tired. Would you do it?"

"Okay. Heavenly Father, I'm sorry I ran away. I'm so stupid." Ruth saw her clench her fist and hit her leg. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Ruth hugged her close. "No, sweetheart," she whispered. "You're not. It's okay." Wendy paused for a moment and hugged her mother. Ruth held her close. They hung together in silence for a few minutes.

Wendy started again, her voice husky. "I hope I don't get Wrappers. I hope mommy doesn't get Wrappers. I'm sorry mommy's sad. Please don't let her be mad at me. Help us to get home--tonight. Keep us safe from bad men. And the Name of Jesus Christ is the Lord. Amen."

"That was a fine prayer, honey," Ruth said. She could just barely see her daughter's face through blurred eyes. She tried to keep the emotion from her voice. "Go to sleep now."

"Okay, mommy." Wendy made no move to leave her mother's arms for the coat. She clutched her doll and gazed up into her mother's eyes. A faint twinkle flashed off them in the dark.

"Mommy," she said after a while. "Are all the Wrappers bad?"

The question surprised her. She thought for a moment--thought back on every Wrapper she had ever had dealings with. She remembered what Pastor Johnson had said once--that maybe the

Wrappers was one of the plagues God had sent to destroy some of the wicked before the Lord came. Did all the Wrappers turn evil because of something the disease did to the nervous system, or did the disease, somehow, seek out only "the wicked?" But how could that be? How could a disease seek out behavior and infect only those who did certain things. Ruth shook her head. It defied reason. Still, she couldn't remember a Wrapper who hadn't been utterly self-centered, cruel and at best, amoral. She thought about her daughter, exposed to the disease. Her answer was soft and calming. "No, Wendy. They're not."

Wendy thought about this for a moment then added, "Will I be bad if I get it?"

Ruth sighed. "Not at all."

"I guess Wrappers hurts."

"I guess it does."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"I don't know."

Pause.

"If you get it will you turn bad? Will you make me go away?"

"Of course not. Now go to sleep."

"I won't leave you if you turn bad." Wendy said. After a time Wendy turned to look up at Ruth. "I'm still hungry, mommy."

"Me too."

"You be the queen and I'll be the princess."

"I will."

"Good night, mommy."

"Good night my little princess."

"No. I'm the big princess and you're the queen, and the prince will save us."

"Okay. Try to go to sleep."

* * *

A breeze was picking up. Ruth held her sleeping daughter close to her. The flickering light beyond the forest looked so warm. Ruth listened. Quiet. There were only the whisperings of the wind stirring the trees. When she was sure Wendy was asleep, Ruth allowed herself the luxury of tears. But she kept herself as quiet as she could.

"What are we to do?" she thought a prayer in inescapable anguish. She knew she should have faith in the inexhaustible mercy of her God. She could cite chapter and verse about how He would preserve her. But all was lost, now. The ship to Mars had left. There was no escaping the death throes of an Earth that languished beneath a primal evil. Ruin, decay, plague, anarchy, famine and death were the norm throughout the world. She thought of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. They were surely loose upon the earth. Yes. But why must they strike down her little one?

Tears swelled up afresh. She clung to her daughter and saw, on her left cheek, the first of the Wrapper sores. It looked like a cross between a bad bruise and a carbuncle.

"Dear God," she whispered with the vehemence of a shout. "Where are You?"

From beyond the forest the flickering light burst as if swollen by some great explosion. But there was no sound. No. Wait. There was a sound. She could barely hear it.

It was gone. It had sounded almost melodic.

There it was again. Carefully, Ruth stood, holding her Wendy in her arms and listening hard.

A trumpet? No, not exactly. It sounded deeper and less metallic. Ruth carefully picked up the coat, pulled it over her shoulders as best she could and began walking up the hill.

She did not know where she was going--toward the fire, at least to see. But then what? A burning city, overrun by looters and gangs--picked clean of food and medicine. Medicine? What good was that anyway? Wrappers was fatal and there was no medicine that could even touch it.

She went on and up. The climb was hard with Wendy, but she was determined to let her daughter sleep a last pain-free slumber, at least for as long as she could.

Her ascent was slow, but steady. The sky was overcast. The ambers flashed among golds up on the clouds for miles around. Strange. It was not the washed glow of a city ablaze. It was as if a single flame flashed and flickered with such brilliance that the very clouds caught each subtle shifting of light.

Wendy stirred. Ruth stopped, waiting quietly as her daughter scratched at the Wrapper wound. In the dim light, Ruth could discern the beginnings of more sores. She turned away. That pure, sweet skin marred so cruelly, and only death would stop the suffering.

She cast the thought away. It was too much to take in with all that had happened.

There it was again--the horn. Its clear tones echoed as if off the sky. Ruth climbed on.

What was that? Ruth stopped still. She held her breath, listening. Was it the horn again? No. This was different. Voices?

Voices! From behind her and off to the left! Ruth hadn't even noticed the dirt road that wound through the trees a ways off. Bikes were parked in a circle. Men were up and about, shining halogens all around the trees.

Had she wakened them, moving through the woods? Why hadn't she been more careful? What did she think--that she was the only human alive for miles? Yes, she cursed herself. That was exactly what she had been thinking.

They were shouting now. She could not hear the words, only the tone of voice: alarm mingled with a brash boldness. She looked around for cover. Nothing. The trees had narrow trunks and offered only sheer numbers lying between her and the gang members as cover. She crouched low. It was all she could do.

"There," a hoarse voice called. "It's a woman! See over there? Put your lights on and look over there!" They started into the woods after her. She hesitated only a moment before jumping up and running.

"Mommy?" Wendy cried.

"Shh! Be quiet!"

"I don't feel good! What are you doing?"

"Bad men. Be quiet and hold on!" she stopped long enough to swing Wendy around until she was hanging on piggyback. She started moving quickly.

Where to go? She searched for some sort of shelter. Stay off the road, though. They'd overrun her in seconds if she got on the road. She glanced back. They had fanned out behind her. The only way out was up.

Lights whirled in her eyes. She staggered. Thunder rolled from beyond the forest. The flickering gold flared once, twice.

"Mommy," Wendy said, her voice jostled by Ruth's running.

"Not now."

She could see their faces, oily, bearded, covered in scar designs.

"But Mommy . . ."

"Wendy," she reproved between over exerted breaths. "I can't talk now."

"But the men . . ."

"We'll get away."

"Hurry. Mommy! I see them!"

The trees cleared. Ruth sprinted toward a large outcropping of rock some thirty meters away.

"Hold on tight!" she called and broke into a sprint. She didn't look back. Their harsh voices cajoled closer and closer. She reached the rock. Beyond it the glow of gold shone bright as sunrise. She climbed up, slipped and hit the ground with a thud and scrambled, frantic. A strong hand grabbed at her ankle. She kicked back hard and connected. The hand let go amid harsh cries of pain. A couple of them laughed.

"Get up ahead of her!" the thug behind her yelped.

She kicked hard, again and again while she fought to out climb them. A blur of black leather leapt up the hill to her left. He reached the top, looking down. Grinning with chipped and slimy teeth, he reached out his hand. Wild eyes bored from his filthy face.

Thunder cracked. The man above swirled around at the golden glow.

"Holy . . ." But he did not finish his obscenity. The glare on his face detonated in a golden, sun-bright brilliance. Utter terror washed his features, then a gust of wind slammed against him. He teetered, struggling for balance. Another blast lifted him off the rock and tossed him like a doll. He tread the air and hit the ground tumbling.

More wind exploded through the trees.

"What about . . ."

"Come on," he was whimpering now. "Will you get the . . ." more thunder crumpled overhead. He pulled at them like a lunatic. They started slapping at him but he ran. The wind tore a branch from tree. It spun at the gang, hitting the ground and scraping at a couple of them as it went past. Ruth sank back from sight, holding Wendy close. Lightning pierced the dark while a painful, thunder answered so close behind they were virtually indistinguishable. Ruth screamed against it. The purple, after image of the flash cleared. Anxiously, Ruth peered down. The men were gone. Gone. She sank down, jolted, confused and thankful.

It started to rain. Wendy climbed into her lap.

"It's okay, Mommy. The men . . ."

Ruth pulled her daughter to her.

"Home, mommy! Please! It's just up there! Please!"

"There is no home!" Ruth nearly screamed. Can't you get it through your..."

"But Heavenly Father . . ."

"The wind, honey! The lightning and the wind scared the bad men away!"

"Heavenly Father makes the wind, doesn't he?"

Ruth sighed, exhausted, angry.

"Oh, Wendy . . . honey. Don't you see? It was just the wind!"

"No it wasn't!"

"Look! You want to see? Come on!"

She swung Wendy on her shoulders again and pulled herself up over the crest of the ridge . . . and stared.

A great pillar of fire hung suspended above a city of whiteness. It turned and flashed with a radiance that seemed beyond any flames of earth. A cluster of magnificent, opalescent temples glistened in its light, perhaps a dozen tolled. A city stretched out from the temple complex in all directions. Its streets reached like the spokes of a great wheel. Beyond its edges were farmlands, green and verdant and ripe with crops. A nation of thousands of tents clung to the land beyond the crop fields.

The rain let up as quickly as it had begun.

Sculpted ensigns stood raised above the tents: a golden lion, a bull standing atop horns, the figure of an ancient sailing ship. On the other side of the city stood another ensign: two clear stones

set in a frame with strips of white, black, and wine trailing from them--more. How Ruth could see all at once she did not even reason, for the scene spread across miles and on to the horizon.

"Look, mommy. The men with lights."

Two men came forward from the direction of the city. One gently took Wendy from her mother's weary arms. The child did not hesitate. He enfolded her in a warm, dry blanket. The other wrapped one around Ruth's shoulders. She was warm in moments.

"You're safe here," he said to her.

"My little girl! She has . . . she has . . ."

"She will be made whole."

"See?" Wendy said, hugging the man that held her. "See the lights in their faces?"

"I am beginning to," Ruth said. Then looking back across the city, she stared in amazement, swallowing the lights and the smells and the ripple of music. "What is this place?" She looked over at Wendy, unable to speak.

"We're home, Mommy. We're home.

The End

Continued from page 13

"Right then, the truth of it is that neat trickery and a loving heart won the crown of Wolvmeadow. Does that disappoint you lot? Well, you needn't be sorry. The tale is not without danger and thrill. Fair swordplay too. But just remember it ain't like you been told by festival singers neither.

"It starts with strong Grenir crossing the Rushing Flow and onto the moors beyond it. He was searching for a new home for his race, a place for them to be building his hall. Grenir been walking since springtime, and it was winter soon approaching. He'd needed to find a spot sooner. His men were weary, and they'd fought all sorts of sprites and man-races along the way. But, coming onto the thick green velvet, Grenir finally sighs for relief. He saw the wide fields and knew he was at his new land. Just then, they say, a wolf been heard, howling its sorrows at the sky, for it was dusk. Grenir looks at his men and decrees: "Let us know our home as Wolvmeadow!" And they slept their first night on that rich grass in peace.

"Peace though is a fickle courtship, specially in those times. For on the meadow, in the many pools and brooks that flow down from the mountains, there housed a wicked lot of water sprites, now long since gone. And so, soon the mischief started, and Grenir had to win himself the crown of Wolvmeadow.

"Ach… looks like me beer's all done lads – ah, thanks master Gart – maybe not so much a lout. Right thirsty work this is, and a tale is better said with a nice drop, right?
"Hmm, bout the only thing the bards get right is the name of the Nix-king. Grenir named that water sprite Blodimann, on account of the blood-spout that shoots the air from his pool soon after he makes off with victim. Anyways, what happened was that the water-folk been dancing and singing out on the grasses, and as Grenir's people moved about their business, they come across these sprites. They are not like the Eizmare told of in the villages of your country, young Brecht. That nix is a water-horse that makes off with the poor entranced on its glorious saddled back. They ain't like the Nickelkater neither, that sits at the bottom of the well in Lyndenhof, walks like the cat at night, and pulls in the unweary children with its long hook.

"No, these water-folk were guised as fair men and women that pranced upon the field. Grenir's people were lured by their songs and dances, and thought they had made fine friends and neighbours. But soon enough, Grenir saw the truth of it, as his men, women and children were dragged in to the pools and streams. Red the water was, all over the Wolvmeadow. And these nixes revealed their true form: with bubble-eyes of green, blue, and yellow, slimy hair of green weed, and clammy grey scale-skin. Their soft welcoming hands had become sharp rakes that slashed and pulled. Grenir cried with grief and rage, as Blodimann called thanks from his pool: "Winter-fat, winter-fat to keep me warm!" Though they tried, the survivors could not avenge their wrongs. You see, the water-folk so easily slipped into the deep and disappeared.

"Grenir challenges Blodimann to combat, waving his gleaming sword at the heavens. But Blodimann simply smiles at him from the middle of the dark water. 'You have listened to our songs and danced with us upon the ground. The price, you paid, to consort with the nix; as it has always been.' Grenir did not take kindly to Blodimann's words and thrashed about on the shore. His men struggle to grip him and keep him from the water. Blodimann laughs and makes to swim into the deep, but before he leaves he calls one last time: 'Until the spring, and we continue this merry game!'

"With winter so near, Grenir finally led his people across the Wolvmeadow to find better shel-

ter. All the while he been harassed by Blodimann's bloodthirsty folk, and more were drawn into the deeps, until he came upon the woods. Grenir saw that the water-folk shied away, even though the streams flowed right in among the trees. So, he halted his wretched people and said: "We'll build a wall here, and behind it we put our homes." And so they began building Wall on Wolvmeadow as the first snow began to fall.

"Gives me the creeps it does! Imagine being at building, when half your people lay butchered by sprites that housed on the meadow so near. But Grenir was a bold man. And he had vowed revenge for the fallen, as been done in those days. So there was no thought of being away further.

"In the winter that came, the threat of the nixes in the waters of Wolvmeadow gave way to the bitter quiet of snow and ice. Grenir's folk finished the first walls on the Wolvmeadow, as the water-folk vanished to the under-deep. Grenir was, for now, master of his new land. It was to prove though, that trouble was not far a field. For the winter brought wolf packs out from the woods. And Grenir was taken to call those woods to his northeast, the Wolv's Trees.

"Behind Wall on Wolvmeadow Grenir was safe. The trouble was he been needing wood to keep building, and for his hearth. He also needs to hunt and fish. The wolves make travel outside the wall very troublesome, and skirmishing with the beasts was costing him lives. Grenir knew that he had to do something for his people soon, or they would not live through to spring. So he sets off to combat the big beast that he saw leads the wolves. That wolf was huge and had killed the most of Grenir's folk. And on the wall his men farewell him, and watch his blond braids and red cloak wave in the wind, as he into the Wolv's Trees.

"Ahhh, a warm swig – truly comforts me heart – this part always gives me the shivers. And I see one or two of you should do with an ale to impart its courage too. Young Brecht… why don't you be spotting us for a fresh round?

"Where was I? – Ach right – Well, Grenir is not long in the trees, coming on a glade that morning, when he been surrounded by them wolves, snarling and howling at him. He keeps them at bay, whirling his blade about… You heard, that his sword been forged by a dwarf? Supposed to be feather-light and strong and sharp, like none other. Anyways, that there is another story, right lads?

"But the wolves don't attack him, just keep him from moving further into the woods. Then the great wolf-leader appears. Its golden eyes stare at him mockingly, it standing so fearsome and tall. Grenir hefts his blade with both hands, keeping the point slicing at the wolf pack encircling him, but shows great patience and courage, and does not move to battle. At last the wolf-leader springs forward and enjoins Grenir in combat.

"Heard it said they fought till past the mid-day without either gaining the upper hand. Grenir strained against the bites on his body, the great wolf trembled from slashes in its thick fur. The snow was ploughed with dirt, and painted with scarlet from man and beast. And still they fought, when from beyond the circle of on-lookers cries a strong voice: 'Stop!'

"The wolf freezes, Grenir's taste on its jowls. Grenir too, the salt of his enemy on his lips, halts his charge. That deep voice commands attention. To Grenir's amazement there then bounds the Bockmann onto the bloodied snow.

"You've all heard of him? Thought as much – those bards always get this wrong.

"Well the Bockmann is a forest sprite, with the body of a goat, but the upper torso of a man. On his head he has fair hair, split by the goat's horns. His glittering blue stare is the colour of the under-deep. And laughs he does, as he comes upon Grenir and the wolf.

"He playfully stares at the two combatants. Grenir notices how the wolf pack backs away, and wonders at this sprite's power. The deep voice rings again through the glade: 'You should not fight the man that can defeat the Nix-king.' His laughter follows, long and hearty. The wolf-leader slights forward, howling rage at the Bockmann, and Grenir steadies himself, expecting it to jump the sprite. But to Grenir's surprise, in a flurry of snow-swept wind, the wolf disappears and a lady dressed all in white stands where it once did.

"Grenir's heart aches, as she is plainly beautiful. She stands long and slender, skin like milk, with dark grey hair and vibrant yellow eyes. And she bleeds from gashes in her crisp gown. How do you know this, Bockmann? she asks in a rough voice.

"The Bockmann smiles and looks straight at Grenir, winking. 'I would not have come if it were not so. But for proof: who among men has ever been your match?' The Wolf-lady thinks on this. 'You better be right!' she says, and strides off into the woods. The wolves too, slink away, and only Grenir and the Bockmann are left in the battle-place. The Bockmann turns to Grenir and says: 'You have her permission to enter the woods Grenir. The wolves will do you and your people no harm this winter. But you will need to defeat the Nix-king. Seek the giant, he has something that you need.'

"The Bockmann then springs away, but Grenir calls after him: 'Who is she?' The Bockmann slows and calls back to Grenir. 'I should have anticipated that, shouldn't I? Beware Grenir! She is the guardian of the creatures of this wood, a sprite that does not like men. She is Germione!'

"Well me bucks, I hope that me story is not too disappointing to you all. What say you, master Brecht? Shall I continue, if it repays the price? – Thought so. You'll not be regretting it! But what of another ale, then? Hah! Thanks be to you, good lad.

"So then… the winter waned, and spring was near, when Grenir set out to seek the giant. He been leading his people to complete their houses and to scratch out a meagre living from the woods, without any trouble from the wolves. But now he knew the time was short, and he needs prepare for his trial against Blodimann, as the snow is receding. So he made for the mountains, as everyone knows that giants house in them.

"Grenir crosses the Wolvmeadow and approaches the hills to the south, when he sees that the wolf-form of the maiden Germione stalks him at a distance. He smiles to his self, as he knows he has her interest. He is glad, for he has taken no woman since spying her true form. As the days lengthen, Grenir and the wolf behind, climb into the mountain-valleys. But Grenir has no idea of the giant he looks for and he thinks long about what to do. Sitting on an icy log, a fine prank comes to him, which just might yield an answer. So Grenir stays on the log until the sun sinks low, knowing the wolf would be curious. Finally Grenir slides right off his seat, face first, into the snow.

"Aha – Gart Twoberries, you recognise that trick I see by your toothy smile. Takes a prankster to know, I'd add! Well me bucks, the minstrels don't be spinning this part to the tale, so listen good and steady.

"Grenir been lying in the cold wet white for a while, beginning to wonder whether sprites are as curious as they are said to be, when he is yanked back up onto his log. He opens his eyes and finds the face of she he'd been expecting. Germione wears a sour stare, and pushes him back into the snow. 'You've tricked me man. You are in no need – no hunger or pain, and no cold nor plight. What is it then you want?'

"Grenir smiles sweetly, he has been clever. All know that sprites been tricked will offer a service. 'Who is the giant I seek?' says he. The maiden in white steps up to him and smiles in turn,

though it seems to Grenir a trite wickedly. 'The Bockmann didn't tell you? Well, that is just like that meddler. Bockmann meant Krackl Eismannli. The giant that pushes the glaciers and makes snow-drifts and avalanche.' And laughing to herself, Germione leaps away.

"As might any man, Grenir is smitten with that news. How can he hope to find Krackl Eismannli? He would not survive. It would be better to face the Nix-king than to climb the Alps in late winter. But from the distant trees he sees the amused yellow eyes of Germione, and he swears to win her hand with this bold deed.

"Grenir walks for some time in vain, climbing into the lofty heights. It is very dangerous and tiring travel, the snow in places coming up beyond his chest. Blizzards and storms pound him too. An avalanche of melting snow smashes trees off a way in the valley above. Several times he almost slips and tumbles to his death far down below, and soon his body is so numb that he no longer feels the cold. He knew that he would soon give. But then, near despair, with the wolf's eyes upon his back, he hears the crack-crunch of splitting ice. Krackl Eismannli is at work! Grenir filled with joy at the perilous sounds, wades off through the snow-deep with new vigour and onto the glacier the giant is pushing. He grips his courage and looks for a cleft in the ice. And into that chasm he calls with all his might.

Master of mountain ice so old,
King of alpine snow so cold,
Krackl Eismannli in the lofty heights,
Krackl Eismannli of the winter whites,
I've come to you to ask help so bold,
For you are the one that I've been told!

"Grenir then sits down and waits by that rift. He hadn't any notion of what to do next. All he had been told was to seek the giant out.

"Dark descends on that rumbling ice, and Grenir sits with patience. Many times he thinks to call back into the crack for Krackl Eismannli, but he bites his lip. It would not do to goad a giant. It was perilous enough with the glacier splitting and snow collapsing all around him. Finally, the moon over his shoulders, and his eyes blinking with fatal sleep, for the cold has leeched through his entire body, Grenir is aware of a singing voice. He struggles to get up and rub stiff limbs. And there on the glacier, some hundred ells away, Grenir spies the soft glow of a torch moving away from him. Grenir stumbles after it, slowly bringing his taught muscles into better rhythm. He nears the torch, until he clearly sees the dwarf that brandishes it.

"This white-bearded fellow is clad all in white wool and furs, his pointed hat all blue. 'Wait!' Grenir calls after him, but the dwarf keeps on his path singing. Grenir exhausted and desperate, is angered by this sprite's rudeness, and that gives him the strength to catch up to it at a sprint. 'Halt!' Grenir says, but the dwarf marches on. Grenir then tugs at the fellow's shoulder and shouts: 'Stop, I said!'

"The dwarf startles and spins around, noticing the man for the first time. 'Who are you, rude dwarf?' Grenir calls anew.

"Well me bucks, that dwarf was gruff as you like and frowns at Grenir. 'Why, who are you, to stop my walk? I have many leagues to travel this night.' But Grenir knows very well the temper and trickery of dwarfs and towers over the sprite with some menace. 'I am Grenir from the

Wolvmeadow down below these mountains. But I asked first, little dwarf, who are you?'

"The dwarf laughs a deep rumble and gives curt reply: 'Fool man, you know very well the power of a name. And if you don't know me, then I will not tell.' The dwarf then turns and makes to leave. But Grenir calls to him once more. 'I am looking for Krackl Eismannli, do you know where he could be?'

"The dwarf shrugs and grins at Grenir. 'Good luck! Fool mortal, not many seek out that giant, for it is their doom. None can survive the force of the ice on the way to meet him.' Grenir returns the smile and replies to the dwarf in a very low voice. The dwarf cocks his head and his face turns red, anger in his eyes. 'What was that, mortal?'

"Grenir steps forward, fixing the dwarf with sage stare. 'Why, I simply said that I know who you are.' Grenir beams.

"The dwarf seems struck. 'Who am I then?' And Grenir laughs, for he will bind the sprite with its name. 'Why you are Krackl Eismannli!'

"The dwarf trembles with rage, eyes glowering. 'I am but a dwarf, not the giant you seek!' But Grenir, he shakes his head: 'No, you are Krackl Eismannli, despite your form. I know it. All the work, cracking and splitting the ice for ages has made you hard of hearing!' The dwarf bellows, outraged, dropping his torch. He claps his hands thrice, and the snow and ice shifts around him, Grenir stumbling back. And in the bright moonlight, before Grenir stands the giant, as tall as a tree.

"Krackl Eismannli stoops and picks up Grenir, laughing. 'In all my years! You have me! No one has ever guessed.' And he walks Grenir off the mountain and sets him down on the Wolvmeadow. As they part he gives Grenir a tiny lump of ice, and says to him: 'This will not melt. Use it wisely!'

"And so me bucks I come to the last part of the tale. Me favourite too. As you'd guess, the Nix-king may well meet the wrath of Grenir. Just smooth me throat a little – ahh – that really is a good drop!

"Well, Grenir has not long to wait for spring and soon he marches out onto the melting snow of the Wolvmeadow, towards the pool of Blodimann. In his hand he carries his sturdy blade, in his pouch is the ice that doesn't melt, and on his back are the eyes of Germione. He sings for joy as he walks. And from the deep there comes Blodimann's call: 'A little early to be singing by yourself little man. Don't you wish the nix to join your song?' To this Grenir replies sweetly: 'Yes, Nix-king, why don't you join me on the grass, for I've yet to dance with you! Let us continue the merry game.'

"Out of the water poked the heads of the nixes, and Grenir was surrounded. But he paid Blodimann's folk no heed, and beckoned to their king. 'Whatever you are up to, foolish man, you won't catch me!' said Blodimann and made cautiously for the shore. 'Oh won't I, nix?' calls Grenir and sings a merry tune. Blodimann looks at Grenir suspiciously, but he is riled by the man's brash confidence. He can not stand being outdone by such a bold mortal. So he wades up onto the field with pride and stands on horse's hooves. Staying close to his pool, in order to splash away, Blodimann begins to sing too. He wishes to lure the upstart to his doom. Just then Grenir sees his chance, and throws his ice lump in the pool. The water bubbles, and as swift as you like, the pool is frozen, and Blodimann can no longer hide! Panic grips the nix, and he forgets to sing, as Grenir springs at him and smites with his sword. And so the Nix-king was undone, Blodimann's head rolling across the ice of his pool.

"The nixes screamed in rage, and came up from their pools and brooks alike. But the cry of wolves set them fleeing, as Germione and her kin descended upon the field. And Bockmann's voice

rings out: 'Never return to the Wolvmeadow, your king is dead, and so you are banished!'

"As the nixes fled, Grenir, the Bockmann and Germione stood before the Nix-king's pool. 'One little matter left, I fear,' said Bockmann to the two, a smile upon his lips. 'Who now rules upon this meadow?' And Grenir does kneel before his mistress. 'I yield to Germione, guardian of the Wolv's Trees!' Germione places a hand on his shoulder but replies to Bockmann: 'You knew he would do this for me?' But the Bockmann merely bounds away, laughing on the spring-time breeze.

"So, young bucks, that is how Grenir came to rule Wovlmeadow. Germione pledged to him the fields, as she retained the woods. And cleverness be just as vital as that fancy sword work, sung of by minstrels. Of course I see you all want more, but now it be late and I'd better make tracks. What? – What became of the two? Well, how they rule together, and how Grenir finally steals her heart, that be another story, ain't it? Suffice to say that she's loved him – and that is why the feared riders of the Wolvmeadow ride, to this day, behind a knight with the wolf-cloak!"

THE END

Continued from page 17

the low hills towards the heights where the city perched. A placid river snaked around the western bounds of the hill, wandering this way and that. A few narrow stone bridges spanned it, joining with the single road leading north to the woods. The lazy road came up the side of the hill before straightening out and reaching the gatehouse. It looked the same on the other side too; he had seen it a hundred times.

Yet it was the first time Allavin had ever known of an enemy army being so close to it unaware. The watchmen patrolling the heights couldn't see the gathering masses of soldiers and horsemen within the depths of the Shadows Wood. Allavin shook his head in disgust and scratched his beard. The army had been roaming the woods for days now, mashing their tracks and clearing out any witnesses with their dangerous cavalry. It did well to hide their numbers as they converged on the king's road. The city could withstand a formidable siege. But would the king of Dos-Aralon be able to send an army down soon enough to lift it? Fuming, he shook his head again. He doubted it. Not unless they learned about it first. He'd been tracking the army for several days now, and he knew his trade better than the Bandit Rebellion scouts. But how quickly could he get the news to the king?

Waiting within the protective screen of trees, Allavin sensed the movement more than heard it. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the Shae approaching him. They would have been able to sneak up on any man on either side of the war, but Allavin knew the Shae. He envied how well they blended in with the marsh surrounding Landmoor. The browns and greens of their field garb fit the shadows and scrub of the woods. Their features were hardly remarkable, if you knew them as well as he did. Most of his kind thought of the Shae as a freakish, cunning race. Most were disturbed by the fact that they all had pale skin that burned easily in the sun and light-colored hair. Their eyes were beautiful, but only certain colors – green, blue, and gray. He'd seen a few with lavender eyes over the years, but those were rare. They spoke a different language among themselves, an ancient language, with words hauntingly familiar and twisted with multiple meanings. It took a while to pick up all the nuances. Maybe that was another reason why humans distrusted the Shae so much.

But Allavin Devers preferred their company. He smiled in greeting as the four Shae scouts gathered around him.

"It's only a matter of days now before they are in position to strike," Allavin said in the tongue of the Shae. "The Rebellion's army is big enough to take the city and control the moors. It'll be a nasty fight rooting them out of here."

"How many soldiers do they have?" Tiryn asked. He was the leader of this group of Shae scouts and had stunning blue eyes. Allavin had known him for years.

"From what I've seen, it's the entire Shoreland army. Several thousand foot soldiers at least. And they have the Kiran Thall with their horses waylaying wagons and teams from both sides of the king's road. And not simple hit and run raids like they normally do, they're spreading out far, watching for trouble from the north. I'm sure the garrison at the castle is wondering why the traffic from Castun has all but halted. What have you seen?"

"The same as you. The Bandits have gathered an army here. Another one is starting to gather itself in the west. The Kiran Thall are ruthless, my friend. They have no regard for life magic. They offend us."

Allavin nodded. "They do indeed. I need to get north to warn my king. Where are your alarion tethered?"

"Nearby. They hate the moors. We can't stay long."

"Well, our dukes prefer it when the Bandits gather together in one place. Makes them easier to come down and squash." He clucked his tongue. "Not this time though. It will be an agony to re-capture Landmoor. Keep watch for me, Tiryn. I'll need you and your scouts watching from the skies until I make it back."

"There is something else," Tiryn added with concern. "We came across it on our journey over here. I think you should see it. The Bandits have soldiers clearing out part of the forest."

Allavin looked puzzled. "For a camp?"

Another Shae from the group shook his head. He had gray eyes with green edges. "No, it's in the middle of a marsh. I've never understood humans anyway. We wanted you to look at it. It's peculiar…even for your race."

"Show me what you found then," Allavin agreed.

Tiryn nodded and beckoned with a hand signal. Allavin slipped next to him, watching the quick play of their fingers as the orders were passed out. The quiet way they could talk with their hands had always impressed him. This particular group of Shae were among the best trackers in the western rim of the valley. Tiryn motioned for one of his scouts to take the lead.

A single scout darted into the trees ahead, his longbow held low and level with a steel-tipped arrow already nocked. Tiryn motioned again and the other two took to the flanks. It was a masterful tactic, Allavin thought with a smile. The leader couldn't see the first man, but he could see the other two who both relayed information back to him in surreptitious hand gestures – a silent language for a clever people. Allavin was taller and broader across the shoulders than the average Shae, but he moved with a practiced step, mimicking their own and set an arrow in his longbow as well. His worn leather shooting-glove felt comfortable and snug on his hand and wrist and he curled his main fingers around the string, letting his knuckles wedge the arrow into the groove.

They crossed the woods at a swift pace and came upon the swamp Tiryn had mentioned. It was a wet tangle of scarred cedars, uncontrolled vine maple, and matted nets of marsh grass. Wilt and moss grew over drooping branches and tinted the huge boulders with flecks of green and black. The air was heavy and wet and smelled like a sodden cloak that hadn't been laundered in a month. Allavin cleared away a silky net of spider webs, feeling its unseen strands across his beard. A thick canopy of entwining cedar limbs blocked the sinking sun, veiling the swamp with patches of gray. Sweat beaded up on his forehead and his armpits were soon soaked. The moors were always humid.

Tiryn held up his hand, and Allavin stopped. It meant that the Shae scouts had also stopped. He listened, straining to hear past the whir of roach moths. The leader nodded, gesturing. He turned to Allavin.

"Jerrinwey crossed a warding."

Allavin squinted, confused. "A warding is… magic, isn't it? I've never understood all the meanings of that word."

Tiryn furrowed his brow, thinking. "In your language then. A warding is magic – crossing one, for us, is a little like passing beneath a waterfall without getting wet. We can feel even a broken warding. They leave a smell…or a taste."

Allavin looked at Tiryn. "Is the warding Forbidden magic?"

"The warding isn't. But Jerrinwey smells Forbidden Magic ahead. The Bandits are using it."

Allavin nodded. He had expected that. "I'll go closer. Don't risk your patrol, Tiryn."

The Shae smiled. "You are our brother, Allavin. The paper kings will listen to you."

Allavin returned the smile. The Shae called the Kingdom of Dos-Aralon the paper kingdom because of the treaties they liked to sign. It was a good joke, because the Shae sold them the ink. He

nodded to Tiryn to move on and the Shae motioned the others to go deeper. Through the mesh of leaves, their boots sank into a small rivulet of murky water cutting in front of them. Tiryn froze after stepping past it, hand on his heart. He swallowed and composed himself, looking back at Allavin in assurance, before continuing after the others. He'd obviously felt the warding too.

Allavin felt nothing save the damp heat. But the Shae were different in that respect too. They could taste and smell magic in all its colors and shades. Aside from the whickering noises of insects, he heard the quiet rush of a small waterfall and stream.

Tiryn held up his hand and made a gesture of alarm. Jerrinwey hears them, he said with his hands. We are close.

Crossing another dozen paces, Allavin heard it too – the chugging sound of shovels through mud, sinking and slopping. As one, they moved towards the noise. Soon the sound was joined by heavy grunts, and Allavin saw the dim fringes of lantern light ahead through the swamp choked with thimbleberry bushes and witch-thorn. Allavin wiped the sweat from his mouth with the back of his hand and stared ahead. He saw the other two Shae in position, watching the workmen in the middle of the swamp.

Tiryn beckoned Allavin closer.

Ahead in the gloom, he saw the glimmer of water cascading down a huge rock outcropping, washing off the rock steps in thin white rivulets. It collected at the base of the beautiful falls in an overgrown pond, thick and teeming with moss. The moss was everywhere – blanketing the rocks and fallen branches. Even the outcropping and the falls were green with it. In the dim glare of the lanterns, he could see the moss cover the forested glen for thirty paces at least.

Half-clothed men with heaving muscles tore at the swamp with root furrows and shovels, hurrying to finish a network of wooden gutters to drain the pond. Lanterns hung from sagging lengths of twine, offering pale rings of light to the soiled crew. Sluggish gray water coursed through the tilting conduits, dumping into a flat gully forty paces away. Allavin and the small band of Shae skirted the workmen to the left, moving closer to the falls. The sucking sound of the shovels was replaced by the crack of scrapers and pickaxes. Standing in the pond water, the workers scraped the moss from the rocks and tossed the clumps into hand-barrows. Allavin stared at the scene, wondering what was happening. The Bandit Rebellion was collecting…moss? He studied the scene as other workmen approached and poured fresh water from jugs over the soiled moss. It turned a rich shade of green and even in the poor light it sparkled with buds of blue and violet.

Allavin motioned to the plant and made the sign of Forbidden Magic. Tiryn shook his head, scrutinizing the workmen. He looked angry at the devastation of the grove. The falls would have been beautiful and quiet, but the workmen were destroying the peacefulness. Tiryn motioned again and Allavin watched the two scouts he could see raise their longbows and choose their targets. The Shae never allowed the earth to be desecrated like this.

Allavin put his hand on Tiryn's arm, stopping him. He motioned to the moss and pointed to his own palm with the flat of his finger. He wanted some of it to bring back with him. Tiryn nodded begrudgingly and made a quick series of hand signals. There was plenty of moss in the area, and it wouldn't be difficult for one of the scouts to creep in and snatch some. Allavin crouched, wiping the streaks of sweat from his face. He had to find out what the Bandit Rebellion was stealing from the swamp. Was it a poison? A cure? He knew a Zerite healer in Iniva who might know. Tiryn raised his hand again and pointed. The bows quietly bent.

From the shadows of the swamp on the east side, a knight approached the workmen. The glint of field armor became visible in the pallid light. The workmen slowed and regarded the new

arrival. The dark armor was sculpted with a metal trim of ivy and leaves. It was the design of a particular regiment of knights in Owen Draw – a regiment that was now another word for treason. Allavin tried to swallow and found he could not. Sweet Achrolese, he thought in shock. It's Balinaire. He knew the man before him better than most in the valley. He had tracked this man's army throughout the vales and hills of the entire realm. It was Lord Ballinaire himself, the leader of the Bandit Rebellion and its three armies. Allavin had last heard he was entrenched in the Kingshadow Mountains, building a fortress. But here he was… in the Shoreland itself preparing the siege on Landmoor.

Ballinaire spoke in hushed tones to the men in the grove. His black eyebrows were stark against the creased folds of wrinkled skin. His thin hair and short beard were white, like shaded snow. The workers rested, their muscles quivering and dripping sweat. The quiet rush and patter of the falls muffled his words, but Allavin watched him with growing anger and determination. King don-Rion would pay a hundred Aralonian pieces to know that Ballinaire was hiding down here. He'd pay more and he'd rouse every knight and soldier under the Crown. But it wasn't the golden mint from the king's coffers that Allavin craved. No, he wanted peace. Maybe the Rebellion will end at last, he prayed. Dos-Aralon had been sundered by the Rebellion and would continue to be riddled with disaster until Ballinaire hung stiff from a gibbet. Ballinaire had enough men in the Shoreland to take Landmoor. But not enough to hold her against the brunt of Dos-Aralon's armies.

Tiryn clutched his arm. "Jerrinwey is gone."

Allavin looked at him and felt his heart lurch. The point scout was never supposed to leave the sight of the flank scouts. Never. He was about to tell him to send another in when Tiryn jerked at his cloak.

"Run!" he warned.

Allavin didn't argue. In a start, he plunged back into the moors, no longer cautious of the sound they made. Cries of alarm came from the watch, but Allavin knew how to elude the Bandit army. Tiryn's lithe body sprinted next to him, his longbow ready with an arrow. Shouts rose up in pursuit, but the Shae and the tracker had a tremendous lead.

A flash of blue lightning lit the murk of the swamp. A rushed cry of fear and pain followed instead of thunder and then silence. Allavin looked back and saw an inky black shape silhouetted against the trees as the light of the blue fire died. It wasn't Ballinaire.

"Quickly!" Tiryn ordered.

Allavin nearly stumbled through a juniper shrub and managed to keep his footing in the slick mud on the other side. With Tiryn next to him, he plunged into a narrow gully and started up the opposite slope, clutching the cedar roots as handholds and tearing his fingertips on witch-thorn. His hands stung and burned. Allavin hoisted himself and risked another look backwards. One of the Shae scouts was twenty paces back, bounding over rocks and shrubs. Then blue light exploded, blinding Allavin with its startling heat and fire. When the spots cleared from his eyes, the Shae was dead, smoldering with a charred scorchburn through him.

"Shenalle protect us from the Firekin," Tiryn prayed in a frantic voice, scrambling up the slopes with naked fear blazing in his eyes. "Shenalle protect us and keep us. Shenalle bring peace to the troubled…"

Allavin Devers grabbed Tiryn's arm and pulled him up the slope. He started for the ring of trees, but he was alone. Tiryn had spun around and raised the trembling bow. "Keasorn guide my arrow. Keasorn give me courage to strike my enemy."

"Tiryn, run!"

"Vannier grant me luck. Vannier give me cunning."

"Run!"

Allavin saw the black shadow across the gully. With a look of determination on his face, Tiryn let the steel-tipped shafts loose, one after the other, a trained and deliberate motion from quiver to string. Allavin watched the arrows warp left and right of the shadow and clatter against the wet bark of the twisting vine maple. The shadow raised its arms. Allavin dove clear as the blue light lit the sky like a thousand searing candles. Before he could loose another arrow, Tiryn screamed as the bolt of blue light struck his chest, lifting him with its blazing fury and tossed him against a stand of prickle-vine. The magic seared through his chest, leaving a smoking gap and his face transfixed with terror.

Allavin Devers scrambled through the brush, keeping low to the ground. He dodged around trees and stands of juniper, trying to get clear of the forest. He heard nothing, but he knew he was being followed. The black shadow was hunting him. Wrenching his sword from its sheath, he thrashed at the low-hanging boughs and cut away the vines that tried to snare him. The entire scouting party was dead. A Shae scouting party!

The mud tugged at his ankles, clumping on his boots and slowing his escape. It was lighter ahead, meaning he was close to the edge of the woods. He stumbled through the maze of cedar and sedge. Something black pricked his side vision and he changed directions, trying to outdistance it. Huffing with exhaustion, he risked a look behind. The light gave the shadow a form – the form of a man draped in midnight colors. A Sleepwalker. It must be a Sleepwalker! Allavin's heart thundered in his chest. He turned back again, too late. A tree sent sparks of light and pain into his eyes. Blood gushed from his broken nose, and the pain rocked his body. Pushing away, he staggered for the sound of a stream somewhere in the thick folds of the Wood. His broken nose throbbed in agony, sickening him.

Crushing a stand of reeds, Allavin stumbled down a deep inlet and splashed into a pond of quicksand hidden there. The gritty waters immersed him, a smothering bath of sand and shallows. He tried to swim free of it, but the sinking pull dragged him slowly down into the sinkhole. Allavin thrashed upwards, trying to get a last mouthful of air, but he swallowed blood and sand. No! his mind shrieked. He could feel his lungs screaming for air. He was going to die. The thought haunted him in a rush.

The black shadow watched him struggle in vain from the lip of the rise. Just beyond the rows of gnarled cedar, the fortress of Landmoor began flickering awake with torchlight as night and mist descended over the moors.

II

It was just before dusk when the Council sentries came to arrest Thealos Quickfellow. Both sentries wore the sharp, green and gold colored uniform of the Council Elder of Vannier. They had swords belted to their waists, but the weapons looked more ceremonial and polished than the clean, practical kind that Shae soldiers carried. They arrived at the Quickfellow manor and sternly demanded that Thealos accompany them to meet with Council Elder Nordain. Sorrel treated the sentries with cool disdain, as was her inclination, but Thealos had been expecting this. Leaving his room, he looked at Sorrel calmly, seeing the disquiet in his mother's face.

"You've done enough to shame us already, Thealos," she said in a low voice. "You know what you must do now."

He stared at her and then followed the sentries without a word to her.

The streets of Avisahn were empty for the most part. The heavily wooded grounds of the Quickfellow manor fell behind them and the horses' hooves clacked against the smooth paving stones of the main city road. From his vantage near the window of the carriage, Thealos could see the tall spire of the Temple of Keasorn rising in the center of the beautiful city like a mountain amidst of sea of slate-shingled manors and gilded churchyards. The carriage picked up speed as they started down the slope of the wooded foothills towards the center of Avisahn. But that majestic temple was not his destination. The Shae had three gods: Keasorn, Shenalle, and Vannier. Thealos' family worshipped the third, as was customary among trading families. These deities had their own High Council with a stern Council Elder to rebuke the wayward young. An ironic smile twisted Thealos' mouth. He knew what he was doing went well beyond wayward young.

It was dark by the time the sentries escorted Thealos into the keeping chamber of the High Council of Vannier. Though its dome couldn't rival the spire of Keasorn's temple, Vannier's temple was just as opulent and situated closer to the docks near Barters Row. It had always reminded Thealos of a giant eggshell. He watched the two sentries take taciturn positions by the entry door after shutting and locking it. Turning, he stared blankly at the double doors leading into the High Council chamber. He'd been here four times in the last year. Each time, the Council Elder had tried coaxing him into obeying his parents' wishes or repenting some foolish childhood thought. Thealos wasn't expecting any coaxing this time. He'd get a stern warning and a few threats to unman him. Thealos swallowed, preparing himself for it. His eyes bored into the double doors, wondering who had been gathered to witness this meeting. Would Correl be there? He'd been gone all afternoon, and Thealos wondered where his father was. Trying a last-minute bribe probably. The fluted scroll-work of the door shone with a heavy waxed polish. It was an immaculate design and finish, stained a rich auburn, and revealed the symbol of the god Vannier – entwining crescents facing opposite ways. Looking closely at the trim edges, he saw little gouges in the wood. He wanted to click his tongue, but he'd run out of spit along the way. Instead, he sighed nervously. No, this wasn't the first time he had been summoned to speak to Nordain. But it was the first time he'd been summoned anywhere under guard.

"Sit down, Quickfellow," one of the sentries ordered, a disdainful clip to his voice. They both regarded Thealos with open animosity. They should, after all. According to the customs of his people, he was practically anathema just being there. Was it only a formality now? A foregone conclusion in everyone's mind?

Thealos regarded them coolly and then began to pace the keeping chamber. He was never one for sitting quietly for long bouts of time, and he walked in a short circle, thinking about what he would tell the Council Elder when he was brought in to speak to him. He was expecting another censure, that unless he followed the Shae customs as he ought, he would be banished from Avisahn and attainted from his family name. From that moment on, he would be Thealos Kil-Quickfellow. Being a Kilshae was enough of a threat to bully most from abandoning the Shae homeland. But Thealos thought that if he could show Nordain that he wasn't frightened of it, perhaps he could convince him to change his mind or at least open it a little. Was that asking too much?

Knowing Nordain as he did, it probably was.

"You might as well sit down," the taller sentry counseled. They were both shorter than Thealos, though wider around the chest. The sentry who addressed him had crisp blue eyes and a narrow face. "Elder Nordain will call for you soon enough."

"Am I breaking a rule of Forbiddance by standing?" Thealos snapped. The last thing he needed was advice from the very men who would be called to escort him out of the city into exile. It would be done hours before dawn, before the city had awakened to witness the shame of it. Avisahn didn't want its dirty linens wagging in the streets for all to see.

"Don't mind him," the other sentry said. "We'll see how proud he stands when the Elder finishes with him. I've seen lads two Silvan years older than him weeping like babies when it's over." He gave Thealos a challenging glare.

He's mocking my youth, Thealos thought and tried not to smile. What an idiot. Thealos then ignored them, focusing his thoughts on what would happen beyond the sculpted doorway. The gnawing considerations infuriated him. Correl didn't understand. Neither did Sorrel. How could they? They had both followed the proper paths of the Shae all their lives. They were content to spin out their days in Avisahn even though the Shae had once controlled the entire valley. Did they even know what he was going through? Could they know? Thealos clenched his fists, pacing swiftly. It was time to leave Avisahn. Not for the rest of his life. Not until the gods returned with Safehome and made the world new again. Only for a season or two. Why? How could he explain it? A feeling – a prompting. A whisper from the gods? Or maybe from his own mind, desperately hungering for what lay beyond the borders of the Shae kingdom. For knowledge, not just history lessons. For a chance to wear a sword and not only as a decoration like the two sentries did. But if Nordain banished Thealos from Avisahn, he would never be able to return. Was a little freedom truly worth risking that?

The council door opened.

"Thealos of the house of Quickfellow," the robed attendant said. He stared at the young Shae with emotionless eyes. As if the young Shae were a rock or a pond – some unliving thing.

"I am Thealos."

"The Council Elders will now see you."

Elders? Thealos thought in confusion. He was expecting to see Nordain and his priests, certainly not the Council Elders of Shenalle or Keasorn too. Thealos nodded and followed the attendant into the chamber. He was greeted with the flavored scent of spice candles, a musky smell that always made him think of Nordain. He saw the fat Elder sitting in the cushioned armchair behind a wide desk. Two thick candles illuminated the polished desk inset with streaks of blue marble. A sheaf of papers sat arranged before him along with a tall chalice of spiced wine, the Elder's favorite drink. He was a big man, for a Shae, with curling ash-blond hair that was cut above the frill of his shirt. He was already balding, but his face was smooth except for a single pockmark on his right

cheek. His eyes were gray and fierce. A platter sat just within arm's reach, and his belly showed his weakness for the delights of the baking guilds assembled there.

Entering the council chamber, Thealos saw the witnesses assembled in the stuffed chairs around the room. He recognized the Council Elder of Shenalle, Trinton by name, and two captains from the Legion Army of Avisahn were obviously representing Keasorn. There were other witnesses too. His eyes quickly scanned those assembled, one from each section of society. There were more than enough already to banish him tonight. His blood went cold. Nordain obviously wanted an audience.

"Greet the Council Elder, Thealos," Correl whispered urgently from behind him. Thealos felt his father grip his arm painfully.

He twisted free of his father's grasp and gave him a challenging look. "I've been here before, Correl," he seethed quietly, uncomfortable with the stares pricking him.

"Be seated, Thestyr," Nordain said casually, waving Correl away. "You're his Correl, but I'd like to speak to your son for a moment. Yes, your seat…over there. Very good. Come in, Thealos."

Thealos took a deep breath and approached the table. He dropped to one knee, bowed his head respectfully and then rose. "I come as summoned, Council Elder."

"Oh, I do appreciate your obedience," Nordain said with a mocking smile. He sipped from the silver chalice and regarded Thealos coolly. "Do I understand correctly that you have not chosen your calling yet?"

Thealos was forced to stand in the center of the hall, all eyes upon him. That was intimidating enough. He could feel the intensity of their eyes, so he stared down at the floor to steel his courage. Nordain would not make him cry. No matter what happened. He quelled the trembling in his stomach so his voice wouldn't falter. Nordain would try and trick him with his words if he could. He always did. "No, I don't think you do, Elder Nordain."

"Then you have decided?" He sounded amused. "Which of our three gods will you serve then?"

"That's not what I meant. I don't think you really understand what my calling is."

"Ahh, your 'true' calling. This…calling of yours is the one we've spoken of before?" Thealos nodded. "And you feel – what, inspired that you should leave the home of the Shae to wander about aimlessly with the humans in the valley?"

Thealos' stomach twisted with frustration. Nordain was trying to belittle his feelings again. He gave the Council Elder an arch look. "Didn't this entire valley once belong to the Shae, Elder Nordain? From the Ravenstone to the Kingshadow and down to the sea. Am I wrong? Then how can you say I'm leaving my homeland?"

Nordain's gray eyes crackled with fury. His voice was controlled. "How old are you, Thealos?"

"You know very well how old I am. That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

"This isn't a debate," the Elder replied. "I expect you to answer the questions I pose you. Obedience is the First Order, not a Rule of Forbiddance. Now, do I ask too much to have you give me your age?"

"Tomorrow, I earn the age of seven Silvan years," Thealos answered flatly. Oh, the debate was only beginning!

"And what do Shae youths do at such a distinguished age?" Nordain prodded. "What is the tradition of our people?"

"We are told by the Council Elders that we must tithe one Silvan year to the service of the

gods. To whichever god we choose."

Nordain took a sip from the wine chalice. He rubbed the lip of the cup with his thumb as he contemplated. "That is correct. And after that you have your entire life to waste or flitter away as you choose, Thealos. You know we live much longer than our human neighbors in Dos-Aralon. And if you so desire, you could waste thirty of their lifetimes pursuing your own selfish ends." Each word stung as he spoke. "Can you please explain to me why you cannot fulfill such a token responsibility then? To give back one-seventh of what you've already been given, not to mention the dozens more you have ahead of you. I tell you, young man, that if you despise our ways this much, that you cannot bring yourself to make even a paltry offering…you do not deserve to associate with those who have and those who do." The gray eyes flashed menacingly. "Please, do share with us what gives a lad of your limited age and experience the wisdom to know what it best for you, when hundreds, even thousands of your forebears have done what is expected with willing and grateful hearts." He shrugged with the incomprehensibility of it. "Do you feel the length of service is too long? One Silvan year. That is all, and then you have your entire life to yourself. Or are you afraid you may learn something? That you might learn to forget your own selfishness and be of service or betterment to the Shae? Is that what you fear, Thealos?"

"May I answer yet?" Thealos asked, wrestling with his anger.

"Yes, you may. I expect to hear an answer from you. I want to know what gives you the right to abandon our traditions."

Thealos swallowed. "Council Elder, my deepest fear is that our traditions are destroying us as a people. In Vannier's name, let me finish!" he interjected when he saw Nordain open his mouth. "For once, listen to me. Truly listen. Our people once controlled this valley. But we have given it over to Dos-Aralon. They have taken it away from us, piece by piece. We may control the trade along the Trident River. We may barter with the humans and reap their riches. But there will come a time when they will cross the river. We must start preparing for it, Elder. My calling is to go among them, to understand their ways, to try and teach them ours like was done when the Shae first came to this world. I love our people." He felt tears start to choke him and quickly cleared his throat to stifle them. "More than you will ever know. I love my family and I know my choice is hurting them deeply. But I'm convinced of this, Elder Nordain. If we do not take sides this time, the Shae will lose to whoever wins. Dos-Aralon used to be our ally. Now we only sell them weapons and food. But the Bandit Rebellion is getting stronger. It's worn on long enough – and you can't deny that it's affected us. It's barely safe to trade in Sol any more. This is our chance to change what will become of our people in the future! And I tell you, Elder Nordain, that I am also convinced the reckoning will happen before one Silvan year is through. I'm hearing talk of war in the Shoreland by summer. We cannot stand by while it happens without us – again."

Nordain was quietly smoldering. Thealos saw it in his eyes that he didn't believe him. Nordain set the goblet down and folded his arms imperiously. "Are you privy to the secret council of King Silverborne? Do you discuss war tactics with the Legion Army commanders? If it is war you crave so much, choose Keasorn as your calling and join the Shae army. We know what's going on in the valley better than you think. If we got involved in every little…"

"But we won't fight in this conflict either," Thealos tried to say, clenching his teeth. "We haven't since the Purge Wars, and the humans mock us for our weakness."

"And how do you know so much about the Bandit Rebellion? We have watchposts along the Kingshadow still. If there was anything to concern us in the Shoreland, our scouts will tell us. What is the source of your knowledge? Isn't this just gossip you've heard in alley taverns across the river?

Ah, you didn't know that I knew about that?" he accused triumphantly, seeing Thealos flinch. "Your speech was noble and brave. But the truth, Thealos? The truth is that you tire of the Rules of Forbiddance. You feel tethered by our customs and you seek to spoil yourself with the gratification's of Dos-Aralon. As a barter's son, you've been exposed to their life. It's tainting you."

"That is not true," Thealos warned.

"You are deceiving yourself! I have seen young Shae itching to sip from the forbidden cups. I tell you from my experience, I have seen these Kilshae when they try to return, to gain admittance back into the protection of our society. To the very shelter they once took for granted. They are heartbroken when they come to learn that they cannot! Anathema is forever." He leaned forward, giving Thealos a hard stare. "Will you risk that?" he whispered icily. "Are the pleasures of Dos-Aralon truly worth that?"

Mutters of assent rumbled through the chamber. He didn't dare look behind him.

"You're twisting my words!" Thealos countered, stepping forward. "I've never had a sip of ale or eaten their burned meat. I've never done anything to bring dishonor on my name or my family. What sin have I committed to earn this? Our culture is in danger, Nordain. What will you do when the humans come here? Do you think they will grant you one morsel of honor because you're a Council Elder? They will take your chalice and dash your head against the paving stones."

"Are you threatening..?" Nordain roared.

"No! Sons of Fire, I am trying to get you to see what will happen if we continue to sit and do nothing! If I forsake the Rules of Forbiddance out there, I have no right to return. I know that. You do not believe me strong enough to resist their ways. I tell you that I am. As the son of a barter, I must be! Let me see the world as it is. Let me see it for myself, Elder. Without all our shade and illusions. That is all that I ask. If I am wrong, I will humbly submit to any penance you have for me, and I covenant to dedicate two Silvan years to a calling. I ask for a brief while to see if I am right. To follow where my heart leads me, just as our forbears did following Silvermere to this valley all those years ago. Was he was a Kilshae to do so? Then I am in good company."

"And what gives you this right?" Nordain quipped. "You think that the gods of the Shae cannot protect us?"

"Not from our own foolishness. They never have."

"And by what authority do you make this claim?" the Council Elder derided. "Our ruler is the only one who can interpret the gods' will for the Shae. That is the direction we must all follow. You must follow it, Thealos!"

The young Shae stared at him passionately. "I cannot."

"You deny the authority of the King of Avisahn?"

"No, I deny the wisdom of the Shae hierarchy."

"They are the same. If you accept our values, you must accept their decisions. By your soul, Thealos – you must accept it!"

"I will not accept what is wrong – what has been wrong since we've let a stupid bureaucracy overwhelm our freedoms. Look where following frightened hearts has brought us? We've lost the whole valley to the humans. King Silverborne is a coward for letting it happen during his reign. And so are you for not seeing it. May our gods have mercy on us for the way you're destroying this people." And Thealos knew before the last words were out of his mouth that he should have kept that last thought to himself.

III

The Council Elder's private chambers were lavish with gifts from the guilds he represented in Vannier's name. Tall flawless vases, crystal dishes with sweet smelling confections, bedecked curtains bearing the lily-and-rose of the clothweavers guild. Each more dazzling than the last. Expensive trinkets from as far away as Sheven-Ingen littered an onyx table top nestled against the wall near the door. These rattled as the door slammed shut.

"I told you to frighten him, Nordain," Correl demanded. "Not send him to the block for sedition! In Vannier's name, what do you think you are doing!" Thealos had never heard Correl angry enough to actually shout at the Council Elder.

"What should have been done earlier, Thestyr," Nordain replied evenly, giving Thealos a sharp look. Thealos jerked free again of his father's grasp and started pacing. "He's a headstrong lad. Too headstrong. But he's also a victim of high station. You've spoiled him horribly, Thestyr."

Thealos saw the venomous look that Correl gave the Council Elder. "I think I've spoiled you too much, Nordain. You never would have become Council Elder without me. And you're not going to get away with this. Do you know how many votes in the Sunedrion you'll need to condemn him? I'll have Corbund and Val-Mestro make sure it never reaches the general audience…"

"You're getting old to be playing favors with the council…" Nordain chuckled. "There is nothing you can do. He condemned himself in a hall full of witnesses! Trinton is hardly as pious as a gosling, but he heard heresy tonight. I assure you, your son will be under arrest before the night is over." He gave Thealos an arch look. "You do well to look so fearful, Thealos. You should be afraid. I doubt the Sunedrion will cry for your blood, but you won't be a free man when you come of age tomorrow morning."

"It's not fear," Thealos said through clenched teeth. He was furious.

"You're in enough trouble as it is, Thealos!" Correl snapped. "For once, be silent!" He fixed the Council Elder with his finger. "I know what you're doing, Nordain. I may be old, but I am not blind. How much do you want?"

"What?" Nordain laughed.

"You caused this dilemma. What will it cost me to repair it?"

"Save your purse for the morrow, Thestyr. I'm doing this for the sake of the people. We don't need the Kingslayer Wars to start again. Thealos will stand trial for speaking sedition. It's the only way to save your family's honor. Wouldn't you rather he die as a traitor than knifed in some backstreet alley in Dos-Aralon?"

"You did this on purpose," Thealos said gravely. "The summons…the witnesses…"

"I did it for your soul, lad," Nordain replied smugly, his eyes shining. "I gave you ample opportunity to cease this foolishness. You refused. Did you think we would let you walk away in shame? What, a Kilshae? The son of Thestyr Quickfellow? You've always been a very passionate lad. But it is only a matter of time before someone tries to use that."

"You son of Pitan," Correl swore, shaking his head.

"Be careful," Nordain warned acidly. "There will be many who will say he learned this sedition from you."

When he saw Correl flinch at the accusation, Thealos longed to strangle the Council Elder.

"You know I didn't…" Correl stammered.

"Ahh, that is the true issue, Thestyr. What do I know? And how much, exactly, is my good opinion worth to you? As I said, we'll discuss those terms on the morrow." Nordain stepped around to a soft-stuffed couch and seated himself. He gave Correl a hard look. "You may go. I must take the boy's confession tonight so we can proceed with the formal charges tomorrow. And I'm sure the palace will be interested in hearing this right away."

Thealos looked pleadingly at Correl. "Don't let him take me."

The Council Elder raised his eyebrows insistently.

"Let me bring my son home with me," Thestyr asked after swallowing.

"Impossible. I said you may go."

"He hasn't been put under arrest yet! For the love of Shenalle, give him one last night at home with his family!" Nordain scowled at the suggestion. "Whatever it costs me," Correl sighed at last. "Whatever the cost to us, I don't care. Let us make our peace with him before he goes to the Sunedrion."

Thealos was galled with Nordain, at the power he wielded over the Quickfellow family. At last the Council Elder sighed, bored. "He's under your wardship then, Thestyr. But I tell you, if he's not here tomorrow at dawn, I'll have the Council Elder of Keasorn send the Crimson Wolfsmen to find him. Do you understand what that means? If I must send them, he's as good as guilty."

"Upon my word," Thestyr Quickfellow promised, nodding vigorously.

"Very well." He gave Thealos a measured stare. "If I have my way, lad, you'll spend your calling in prison instead of roaming the valley like a drunkard. It could have been different, but remember your obstinacy prevailed in the end. Hopefully, you will become a good lesson to others."

I hope so, Thealos was about to retort, but Thestyr grabbed his arm and directed him to the door.

"Use my private retreat," Nordain insisted, motioning to a fluted screenwork across the chamber. "My last piece of generosity for the evening. And Thestyr – the cost." He tapped his mouth thoughtfully. "I could use twelve reams of satin-cloth and damask. I particularly like the pattern with the yellow primroses." He took a deep sip of spiced wine. "Have it delivered to my attendant in the morning."

"Very well, Council Elder," Thestyr Quickfellow replied tonelessly, hauling Thealos out of the Shae High Council and into the gardens beyond.

* * *

The pale blue moonlight glimmered on the silver window panes. Thealos could hear the sharp voices of Correl and Sorrel arguing in the keeping chamber across the main hall. In between the hard-edged voice of Correl he heard angry words that spoke of his mother's pain. He listened, pausing in the darkness to savor the sounds. He rarely heard her curse.

"I told you that we couldn't trust Nordain," Sorrel wept. "He is a greedy, conniving thief. He'll ruin us – ruin you! I'd sooner trust little Arielle to the Dos-Aralon army than that back-stabbing…"

"I did what I could!" Correl thundered. "He's our son. They were planning to hold him tonight."

"No!"

"I know, I know! This will cost us dearly enough. But what else would they get him to confess? That I'd prompted him to shout off to the Council Elder of Vannier? Sons of Fire, he did it in

front of everyone!"

"What are we going to do?" Sorrel whimpered.

"I'm dispatching a messenger to the palace – to the Princess. Maybe she'll speak for him."

"Against her father?" Sorrel was incredulous.

"What other choice do we have? I'll send messages to the members of the Sunedrion who owe us favors, but I don't have many friends from Keasorn or Shenalle. Normally, this would never go so far so quickly. Nordain planned it from the start."

Thealos bowed his head and tried to bury the rage in his heart. He knew what he was doing would cost his family. He only hoped they would come to forgive him. Opening his eyes, he stared out at the moonswept gardens, filling his eyes with its sights. He'd miss all the comforts of the manor house, but it was the family gardens that would tug at his soul. He'd miss his parents and brothers, but it was his little sister that he would regret leaving behind. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to trap the good memories inside. Pushing away from the window, he went to the door and opened it.

"I hear him," Sorrel warned. As he crossed the hall, he saw Correl and Sorrel face him from the doors of the keeping chamber.

"I am sorry," Thealos said as meekly as he could pretend. He looked at Correl. "I've failed you yet again."

Correl's eyes narrowed. "You've always had your own will, Thealos. Ever since you were a boy. Why couldn't you, for once in your life, have sought the family good instead of your own?" He shook his head, too choked with anger to speak.

"How could I expect you understand me now?" he replied softly. "You've never tried to before."

"You've been doing things your way for so long," Sorrel said bitterly. "But you are still our son."

"I always will be," Thealos agreed. He sighed, hating that it had to be this way. "I'm going to talk to Arielle for a little while. Maybe we can talk later? I thought the worst that could happen would be an exile. I never thought Nordain…" He sighed again and shook his head.

Sorrel nodded, folding her arms and pacing nervously across the tiles. Thealos smiled inwardly. He'd gotten his pacing habit from her. But she didn't try and comfort him. No, she was still too angry. Their eldest son was abandoning the Shae tradition of manhood. Not only that, he had committed a serious crime. This would humiliate them. Giving Correl a final look that tried to be conciliatory, Thealos went up the long flight of steps and down the wide hall, running his palm over the flat banister. He stopped at the hall cross-way where a huge silver-gilt mirror faced him and swallowed the image of the room behind. He resembled Sorrel more than Correl, with her wide forehead and narrow face. But he had Correl's green eyes, a startling color that matched his temper. The face staring back at him was a handsome one – Thealos knew that. He was an incorrigible flirt, especially at parties. But he stared at the image and wondered why the glass didn't show his heart, his thoughts – all the ideas twisting and struggling to come to life inside his mind. It was only an image, and it revealed nothing of the person within. Much like the Shae. What they were on the surface, the polish, glitter and flash, was nothing what they had become deep within themselves. Frightened, reclusive, stubborn. Nordain was hiding from it. So many did.

Closing the distance, he rapped on his little sister's bedroom door. He waited a moment and then entered. Arielle was flinging the sheets away like a thrush caught in a thicket.

"Thealos!" she gasped, running up to him and squeezing him so tightly around the middle it

hurt. "I was scared that you weren't coming back. They were yelling so loudly. I couldn't tell what was happening."

"Shhh," Thealos murmured, leaning down and kissing her hair. He cupped her chin and looked into her eyes. She was a beauty, the darling youngest of the Quickfellow family. "I'll be all right, Arielle. I don't want you to worry."

"Worry! I'm scared and excited for you at the same time." She sighed. "You're my favorite brother."

"You say that to Jaye and Jedian too," he reminded her.

"You're all my favorites," she replied with an impish grin. "But you are my special brother, Thealos. Are you really going to become a Kilshae?"

He gave her an understanding grin. "That depends on whether you can keep a secret."

Her eyes widened with delight. "I can," she assured him.

"I came to say goodbye, Arielle. Because you're my favorite sister."

"I'm your only sister."

He kissed her cheek. "Tell them you were asleep. Tell them the only thing you remember is that I kissed you and promised that I would come home someday. Will you tell them that?"

"You're leaving?" she gasped. "Right now?"

He nodded. "I'm not going to get another chance."

"Can I come with you?" Her eyes were so serious it hurt him to look at her.

He shook his head. "And add kidnapping to the charges? I'd better not, Arielle. Pretend to sleep." She slipped beneath the thick wool and linen covers and shivered. Her eyes were misty with tears, and she squeezed him tightly.

"I'll miss you, Thealos." She tugged on his shirt to bring him down and kissed his cheek. Then she remembered something and dug beneath the covers. "Take this with you," she said, giving him a leather bundle. "I want you to keep it. For when you get lonely."

He stared at the bundle she'd pressed in his hand and swallowed. He knew it contained her wooden hoppit doll. "Thank you," he whispered, giving her one last hug. "I am going to travel the whole valley, Arielle. I'll camp under the pines of Ot, watch the tide off the Cliffs of Demos, and drink from the Dayspring Rush. And I will bring you a gift when I come home." He rose and approached the bedroom window.

"A White Rose of Tharkin?" she asked, excited. "If you find one...?"

"If I find one." He gave her one last smile and disappeared through the window before she could see him cry. He shut the glass and felt the cool wind touch his face high up on the balcony. He breathed slowly, shuddering. Leaving her was harder than he expected. Climbing over the rail, he lowered himself down the black-iron slats and then dropped soundlessly into the bushes of heather below. Keeping low, he waited and watched. Nothing.

With the practiced Shae step-walking pattern, Thealos went around the side of the Quicksilver manor, staying on the dark rich soil and behind the rows of hedges and feather-fern. He reached his bedroom and found the stash he had left out the window earlier that day. A wool tunic and a long-sleeved linen shirt were folded neatly in a stack and he quickly put them on before wrapping himself in a thick green cloak. Thealos secured his favorite hunting bow to his travel sack with leather ties and slung the burden around his shoulders. He shoved a long dagger into his belt. He listened at the silver windowpanes but he could not hear anything.

Thealos wondered how long he would have before Correl went to Arielle's room looking for him? An hour or two? Not much time.

Parting the branches of a fragrant azalea bush, he looked up at the glittering ocean of stars. The blue light of the moon Eroth bathed his face. He stared at the road, letting his vision adapt to the night colors. He waited patiently, knowing Nordain. Sure enough, he saw the two sentries who had kept him at the Shae High Council. They were watching the moonlit face of the manor with a good view of Thealos' room. Arielle's room was on the other side of the manor. Without a sound, he crossed behind the manor and disappeared into the dark gardens, following the side of the paving stones to keep hidden in the trees. Thealos crossed a small brook-stone bridge, feeling the darkness of the wooded grounds absorb him into its bosom, and he savored the smells in the air. He knew the back woods better than anyone else in the neighborhood.

If Nordain had made sure that Keasorn's Crimson Wolfsmen had been watching for him, Thealos knew he would never have made it sixty paces from the manor house that night. Inwardly, he was pleased his family worshipped Vannier instead. Their god may have made men good at trade. But they were terrible watchmen.

IV

The harsh yellow glare of torch fire washed over Thealos' face as he climbed the shoal docks from the barge and entered the city of Dos-Aralon. He dropped a few Aralonian pieces into the grubby hand of the ferry-keeper and joined the ranks milling about the crowded pier. He had chosen the southern trading docks deliberately, knowing well in advance that they would be crowded for hours yet to come. Darkness had already fallen over the jammed city, but with torches and lanterns to play the sun's part, there would still be many willing to deal. Even with a Shae.

Thealos passed beneath the high bastions and ramparts facing the river. He knew the trading streets better than most in Avisahn and quickly marked the barters his father traded with – the clothweaver and draper guilds. Avoiding those, he ducked down side alleys where he could avoid curious stares. The night was warm, but he wore the green cowl up over his head to hide the telltale features that branded him a Shae – the straw-blond hair, light eyes, and pale skin. There were other traits that distinguished him from the humans of the valley. He could feel the tremor of the earth magic and discern whether it was Light or Forbidden. He could smell color, and he could see in the dark like a cat born to walk the rails at night. He knew the humans were afraid to see the eyes of a Shae glowing in the dark. He smirked. Let them fear.

Thealos walked quickly and confidently, one hand on the sharp dagger in his belt. He used the Shae step-walking pattern of the woods to keep his soft boots from clipping loudly on the stone. More than anything else, he wanted to get out of Dos-Aralon and into the open plains before the gates were shut. Nordain would send sentries for him in the morning. Once Nordain was certain Thealos had abandoned Avisahn, he would ask the Council Elder of Keasorn to summon the Crimson Wolfsmen. They were the defenders of the Shae kingdom, more highly trained than the regimental knights of Owen Draw, but Thealos doubted they knew Dos-Aralon as well as he did.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he caught a subtle movement behind him. Whirling, Thealos drew his dagger and stared down the empty alley. He gripped the hilt tightly, ready in a defensive crouch for a thief or robber. He could see the light from the street at the other side of the alley. There was nothing, not even the scuttling of a rat on the cobblestones. He stared for several long moments, letting his breath out evenly. He usually trusted his instincts and his reflexes. Lowering the cowl, he listened, trying to catch any clues from the wind. Laughter glided past him from one of the many taverns on Highwater Street. He smelled the raw rich flavor of ale and honeyed mead – both Forbidden to the Shae. He tried to sense the Earth Magic, but it was crowded down and stamped beneath the layers of street and filth. The sense of the magic was almost inaudible in Dos-Aralon. It had been so since the humans had settled there, or that was what he remembered from his studies.

Keeping his guard up, Thealos raised his hood and continued south, frequently checking the mouth of the alley behind him for any sign of pursuit. As he entered the next street, he kept with the flow of wagons and guild carts. Along the city wall, the stalls and booths were corded down with tarps. Paid sentries walked down the ways, protecting the wares during the night. Theft was common, Thealos knew, but only on the human side of the river. Painted signs and crooked flat boards spoke of the linens and trinkets for sale. He'd seen them so many times. He hoped he would never have to cheat a man for another bolt of cloth again.

The south ports of Dos-Aralon wedged down against the furthest walls and gates. The walls

were easy enough to follow, but sometimes the gatehouses were nearly indistinguishable from the high watch towers and cobbled steps rising to the bastions. He'd never negotiated through Dos-Aralon at night, but he found his instincts were still true and quickly approached the South-Bannik porter door leading out to the valley plains. Something tickled the back of his neck again, an awareness, a whisper of doubt. He paused at the street edge and turned around, looking back once more. He didn't know what he was expecting to see, for there were plenty of shopkeepers and journeymen about him, even a cluster of hired guards. It was a nagging feeling, like an itch between his shoulder-blades he just couldn't quench.

Something was following him.

Dos-Aralon was a dangerous city. He knew that well enough, and recognized that safety would only be found out in the hills and hollows of the valley. His instincts were better attuned than those of the human neighbors. He sheathed the dagger in his belt and hurried to the porter door. There were five sentries posted at South-Bannik wearing the army uniform of Dos-Aralon. This was typical.

"The moon greet you," Thealos said in the common language of the high kingdom. "I need passage tonight."

"Leaving?" the porter captain asked. "What for?"

"I have business elsewhere," Thealos replied. He looked over his shoulder, but saw nothing to mark his premonition. He still felt it.

"The gates are closed for the night. Come back in the morning."

Thealos tensed. "I can see the gates are closed, captain. But this is the quickest way. By the time I reached Kimberton Gate, it would be curfew. I need to…"

"Not tonight, lad. They're going to ring the bells soon, anyway. Pack up for the night. You can leave in the morning." He folded his arms, immune to Thealos' pleas.

Thealos scrutinized the porter guards. "This is a delicate matter," he continued softly, unslinging the travel pack from across his shoulders. It was obvious they were expecting a bribe. In quick motions, he untied the mouth and reached inside. "My father is expecting a wagon shipment from the Radstill vineyards. If it arrives early," he continued, withdrawing a sealed bottle of Silvan wine, "we stand to make quite a profit from the sale."

"Sweet Achrolese," one of the guards gasped, staring at the bottle. "Is that…?"

"Yes, it is," Thealos answered with a greedy smile. "See these symbols? It's a dark red from the Silverborne kegs. As I said, gentlemen, this is an important meeting I must attend to. If you let me out tonight, I'll let you share this one. Even though it will cost me," he said with an exaggerated sigh, "Do we have a deal?"

The porter captain stared hungrily at the bottle and nodded. Fetching the gate keys from an iron ring around his belt, he unlocked the doors. Thealos nodded approvingly to the captain and handed him the bottle. He listened with smug confidence as the porter doors were closed and sealed behind him. He wondered whether any of them knew the bottle cost barely thirty silver pence in Avisahn. It was a modest table wine that even Arielle drank mixed with water – though still good by human standards. It did come from the Silverborne kegs. Of course, that's what the label declared on nearly every bottle of wine from Thealos' home.

* * *

When dawn broke like a foamy wave over the woodlands, Thealos shook his head wearily. It

didn't feel like that much time had passed. The purple sky brightened until it shone a lustrous blue, hiding the stars in the light. Woven blankets of gray clouds floated along the channels of wind, bringing the smells of wildberries and decaying bark. The city of Dos-Aralon was well behind him, and he walked at an even pace, keeping away from the river. His plan was simple, and still a little unformed. Thealos wanted to walk the whole valley, to get a feeling and friendship with the people of the land. He wanted to meet farmers and soldiers and spinners – even members of the Bandit Rebellion – and learn from them. He knew he should be cautious. There were stories of what men did to the Shae away from the homeland. Of course, the stories were meant to discourage exactly what Thealos intended to do. But if he could find a small group to travel with – a group of humans he could trust – it would increase his chances of surviving. With that in mind, he continued south, following the Trident River because he thought Nordain would look to the western lands for him first and Correl would search the city. Besides, Thealos knew the eastern ridge of the valley from the trading routes that Correl used, and he thought it wise to stay near familiar ground until he reached the Shoreland. Once he was down there, he could catch a ship to anywhere in the world and his trail would be impossible to pick up. Bluejays squawked from the branches of tall poplars, fluttering from tree to tree, chasing flying beetles. By midday, a rim of sweat had formed on Thealos' brow. Lowering the hood so he could feel the wind on his neck, he swept his long blond hair back and kept it loose. He was tall for a Shae, but still recognizably one even at a distance.

By mid-afternoon, Thealos could see the inland valley for miles. He stopped to eat on a low rangy hill crowned with trees. It overlooked a rich land with pastures dotted with stands of oak, ash, and maple trees. A hawk circled in the sky before dipping down to snatch a jackrabbit. He saw a few riders in the valley coming up from one of the many farms and towns scattered throughout the Inland. He knew his green cloak would conceal him in the tree line. Biting into a ripe wrepfruit, he felt its juice trickle down his chin and mopped it with his sleeve. The strangest part of being in the valley was the nakedness he felt without the thick woods around him. Avisahn was an intricate forest-kingdom that stretched nearly the entire western slope of the Ravenstone Mountains. But its borders ended abruptly at the Trident River. He was used to spending the day in shade, not under the hungry burn of the sun. Growing up, he had stared down at Dos-Aralon's valleys as if they were the low countries, not a land that had once been a mighty forest. He wanted to laugh. A mighty forest. That was long before the Purge Wars. It was during the time of King Silvermere, the first Shae king to settle the valley.

When nightfall finally came, Thealos hid himself in a small grove of birch and nestled with his cloak in a patch of broad-leaf brush. He dared not build a fire, even though the air was cool. His vision was sharper in the darkness without a fire glaring in his eyes, and he had no intention of being caught off-guard. Cradling his short bow in his arms, he set out three arrows where he could easily reach them and fell into a light sleep. He awakened with a start each time an owl hooted. It was an exposed, unprotected feeling, not as comfortable as hunting in the woodlands of Avisahn.

When Thealos awoke the next morning, he was covered with chilly dew. A heavy white mist hung all around him, so thick he couldn't see farther than he could toss a stone. The trees looked skeletal outside the grove. Thealos had seen the fog from a distance before – the docks at Avisahn and Dos-Aralon were always thick with it in the morning – but it had never claimed the highlands of the forest. Not being able to see was frightening, but exciting as well. Walking in the soft wet kisses of mist, Thealos discovered it had a taste – a little like tart apples dabbled with salt. Without the help of the sun, it was difficult to determine which way to go. He tried to keep heading south, but he caught himself straying further inland.

About midmorning, the fog dissipated and he could see the valley again. Long diagonal rows of wheat and corn grew in farms surrounded by stone fences. Fruit orchards running for miles deeper inland flaunted a rich harvest, and Thealos stopped at midday to have a snack of plums at the southern edge of a farm. He left a few Aralonian pieces at the foot of the tree to pay the farmer for the fruit he took. The farther south he went, the more the land became rugged with hills and riverbeds. Just before nightfall, he saw an old man sitting on the porch of a small home smoking a long-stemmed pipe. He lit a lamp and sat back on the crafted porch and watched, scanning the horizon. Thealos saw the old man raise his hand and wave, and he felt awkward that he had been seen. He waved back, but chose not to stop his journey. He wanted to be at least three days out of Dos-Aralon before making contacts with the humans. That would make him even harder to find. Cutting east, he went to find the river and shelter for the night.

The prairie grass whisked at his boots, and he kept his stride long. As he came down the slope leading towards the majestic Trident, he spotted a campfire in a tight cluster of vine maple near the riverbank. It was a large fire, and he could smell smoke and stew as the wind shifted towards him. The stew smelled like wild onions and rabbit meat, but it was laced thickly with bay leaves. The campfire flickered as something passed in front of it. It was nearer the Trident than he expected for a human camp. But the stew smelled good, not scorched. Curiosity leading, he stepped carefully down the slope and dodged between trees as he approached. About forty paces or so from the fire, he could hear them.

"Fetch the lantern," a gruff voice said. "Can't you get that fire any hotter, Tomn? It might frost tonight."

"Any hotter, and you'll be cutting your stew with a dagger. It's bubbling like Pitan – you want me to burn it?"

"Aaahh, quit moaning. Jurrow, get over here with that thing. You two, don't stand there..."

"Eat trope," another voice snapped. "I'm almost through."

There was a jangle of pots and metal spoons and then a hiss and a curse. "Sweet hate, this is hot! Get me that glove so I don't burn my hand."

"Get it yourself. Here's the lantern, Tannon."

Thealos saw a wink of flint and steel and then a steady glow appeared. It lit the eastern side of the camp, and he could see the man holding it. He had a stubby beard and a shock of gray-streaked hair. He wore the leather tunic and buckles of a field soldier, but he didn't wear any livery. A wide brown belt wrapped around his thick waist with short flat daggers shoved in the band. Wrinkling his eyebrows at the glare of the lantern, the man stood and held it away from him.

"You're crazy holding that thing. Now every Wolfsman on the other shore can aim for your throat." They all had similar armor, each missing a badge or rank.

Tannon held up one of his hands. "I'm not asking you to do this. I'm not asking none of you. You do what I say, the quicker we make some pieces and get back north."

There was a chuckle from one of the other men. "You just want to get back to Holly's. Admit it. If you're so banned impatient, why didn't you just bring her along..."

The man stuttered when a knife landed between his legs. Thealos blinked, having barely seen Tannon's reflexes. He was a heavy man, but he threw a knife like a whip-snap. Tannon frowned and planted his fist on his hip. "That's enough, Beck." They were quiet for a few moments. "You know why we're out here. We looked through that banned snag of maple for a week. Now, let's see what we've got to show for it. Open up the sack again. Show us the sash."

Thealos craned his neck, staring closer. He saw one of the muddied soldiers withdraw a

Crimson Wolfsmen sash. Thealos started, blinking with surprise. Surely these men couldn't have taken down one of the Shae defenders. It was impossible! Slipping from behind the tree, he started creeping closer. He moved like a cat – soundless and sure-footed. He could see the others around the crackling fire, each offering something to the stash, something they had found during their search. Thealos wanted to get closer to get a feel for what they had found. Whose side were these men on? He'd heard the Bandit Rebellion wore black and gold – well, at least the officers did. Were these men from Dos-Aralon? He didn't know, but he wanted to find out, especially if they were baiting Shae and killing them. Drawing closer, Thealos crouched and waited, studying each individually. One held up a smooth battle dagger, the hilt tarnished, but Thealos recognized the slant of the blade. It belonged to a Crimson Wolfsman. He scowled at the humans for the irreverent way they touched such an elegant weapon.

The one tending the fire had reddish brown hair and a long nose. He bent over a small cauldron of stew and he tasted it eagerly and then fanned his mouth. Slipping a bodkin arrow out of his quiver, Thealos fit it to the tight bowstring. He wanted to be ready just in case…

"In the trees!" someone shouted from his right side. "Over there! He's got a bow!"

Ban! Thealos cursed silently. He needed a diversion now. Dropping to one knee, he raised the bow and firmly pulled the arrow back to his ear. Thealos let it fly. The arrow hissed into the mass of burning logs. Sparks and cinders exploded in a spray, knocking the cook back with a howl of fright. He brushed the glowing embers off his leather tunic and stumbled back from the flames.

"There!" Hoth pointed, drawing his weapon – a notched polearm with a jagged cleaver. The soldiers spread out, rushing from the fire's perimeter as if live ants were biting their ankles. Before Thealos could rise and back away, he heard a shutter click and then a beacon of light fell on his face and chest. Tannon held up the lantern and scanned Thealos warily. It was time to run. These weren't just soldiers, they were thieves.

"The eyes!"

Behind him, Thealos heard the quiet crunch of leaves before a knobbed mace struck the back of his head.

V

Pain and nausea soaked through Thealos in waves. He struggled to open his eyes. Hoow long he'd been unconscious, he didn't know. As his sight came into focus, it took a moment to realize that he was laying on his side, looking at the blazing white tongues of the campfire. He tried to sit up, but found he had nothing to prop himself up with. His arms were bound tightly behind him, the ropes digging into his wrists. Dirt and bark shavings painfully cushioned the side of his face. Blinking, he struggled to move and found himself nearly helpless. His ankles were also tied.

"He's awake."

A fit of panic nearly overwhelmed him, but he forced it down. He had never been in bonds before. Rolling onto his back, he tried to sit up. His head swam with dizziness and he thought he might throw up.

"You hit him pretty hard, Cropper," the one they called Tannon said with a half-smile. "Thought we'd have another dead Shaden on our hands."

"He wasn't very good," came the reply. Cropper was a thin, spidery man with sack-wheat colored hair and livid eyes. "No Wolfsman anyway."

"Could have been," Tannon said. "Could have been a Sleepwalker too. Good work."

The others were asleep around the fire, their faces filthy and haggard. They smelled like Silvan wine. His mouth went dry. Thealos' clothes were rumpled, his pockets empty. His travel sack lay in a heap, the supplies he had thoughtfully packed were already spilled out and shared. A cold, growing fury started to ball up in his chest.

Tannon studied him. "You didn't know what you were doin', did you, boy?"

Thealos fought to sit up and nearly sank back down with the effort. "That depends," he answered.

"Hmmm?"

Thealos knew he'd have to be careful with what he said. But he was the son of a barter, and he knew how to twist things to his advantage with words. "I saw your camp, Tannon." He gave the thickset man a cunning look. "At first I wanted to share your fire. But when I saw your little collection, I thought I'd help you."

"That's horse trope," Cropper said. "I saw you. You drew your bow first, Shaden. You were gonna shoot us down and steal it."

Thealos ignored the comment. He focused on Tannon. "Either I'm a poor aim, or I didn't mean to kill anyone here tonight." He knew what the humans thought of the Shae. He had to talk quickly to dispel Cropper's first impression. "I did get an arrow off," he continued, nodding towards the fire. "It's pretty obvious you're the leader, Tannon. If I'd wanted to harm your group, I wouldn't have missed you."

Tannon rubbed his mouth. "He's got a point."

"We should just kill him and dump him in the river," Cropper said offhandedly. It was said in such dispassionate tones that Thealos' skin crawled.

"Do you want to know why I came so close?" Thealos challenged.

"Because you're a half-wit?" Tannon replied.

The young Shae shook his head slowly, ignoring the throbbing in the back of his head. Please Vannier, let them believe me. "Because I wanted to read what's on the Wolfsman sash. That fabric I

saw one of your men hold up. You can't read it, can you?"

The wizened soldier frowned.

Thealos swallowed. "Where did you get it?"

"Don't trust him," Cropper warned, shuffling his legs. "He'll trick you, Tannon. They all do."

"He can try," the soldier replied.

"You have the advantage here," Thealos pleaded. "I'm trying to save my neck. So would you in my place. I'm just trying to show you that keeping me alive will be to your advantage. Can any of you read Silvan?" He looked at Cropper then. "Can't you?"

Tannon picked up the Wolfsman's dagger and studied it in the firelight. "How much would this fetch me in Dos-Aralon, boy?"

He grinned. "The dagger of a Crimson Wolfsman? You can't buy one from the weaponsmith's guild. I can't even buy a blade like that in Avisahn. It can be worth a lot to a collector."

The soldier captain nodded, testing the tip of the dagger with his finger.

"Dump him in the river," Cropper warned. "I hear it in his voice. This one's a barter."

Tannon shrugged. "I'll decide in the morning after we've all talked about it. Get some sleep, boy. This might be your last chance."

Thealos nodded dumbly. He didn't think he would sleep at all.

* * *

"What's your vote, Beck, Hoth?" Tannon demanded, hooking his thumbs in the wide brown belt. The Wolfsman dagger had joined the others in the brace he wore. Thealos remembered how quickly he used them. Swallowing, he glanced at the last two in Tannon's Band who hadn't voted yet.

Beck was the one with the sash. He fingered the fabric, gazing at the strange markings scrawled in a language he didn't know. "I want to hear what he has to say."

"Banned fools," Cropper muttered, chewing on the stem of a pipe. He blew a haze of clove smoke from his lips. The smell was stale – pungent yet sugary. Smoking cloves was also Forbidden to the Shae. Thealos wanted to chuckle with the irony. His life came down to two more votes and all he could think about were the Rules of Forbiddance.

The one called Hoth sniffed and shrugged. "Kill him or don't. It doesn't matter to me."

"I've heard that the Wolfsmen…that they can hear Shaden blood singing," Tomn said. He was the cook, the one Thealos had startled the most with his arrow. Of all the men in their gang, he was slow, but he was grateful Thealos' arrow had missed, and he spoke strongly to save Thealos from Cropper. He had dull green eyes. His face was grimy, but earnest. "Is that true, Shaden?"

"My name is Thealos."

"It's a silly myth," Cropper snapped. He gave Thealos an angry stare. "Just another one of their lies."

Thealos gave Tomn a deep look. "It doesn't sing," he answered in a steady voice, hoping their ignorance would help. "But we do know when the earth drinks our blood. Even some humans say the earth magic sings to them."

"So…so you could tell if a Shaden were murdered?" Tomn pressed.

Thealos nodded. "Is that what happened to the Wolfsman you…found?"

"We didn't kill him," Tomn insisted. "He'd been dead a long while. Isn't that right, Tannon? Just a skull, some bones…plus the clothes. Can't sell a stitch of it, except maybe the sash and the

dagger." He gave Tannon a furtive look. "If we kill him, the Wolfsmen will come after us, won't they?"

"If they were coming, Tomn, they would have by now," Tannon replied with a smirk. He gave Thealos a cunning smile. "Well, it looks like the band will let you live today, boy. If Hoth changes his mind, well…you just keep praying to Shedang, Achrolese, and Vinderhopper that he doesn't." The group cackled at his mocking rendition of the Shae deities.

"Fools," Cropper spat. He tapped the burning cloves out of his pipe and crushed them with the heel of his boot. He left the group, sulking. Thealos stared at the tiny wisps coming from the scorch marks where he had stood. It was another act of defilement, something deliberate to tarnish the land. It made the ball of rage in his heart grow.

Beck came over and dropped down next to him, showing him the mottled sash. His fingers were dirty and strong. "You said you could read this, Shaden."

"Untie me first," Thealos replied firmly.

"What?" Tannon chortled.

"What can I do, Tannon?" Thealos snapped, his temper flaring suddenly. "Escape? You've taken my bow and quiver. You have my knife and my provisions and all the Aralonian pieces I own. I am a good woodsman, but not without supplies. If I ran away, I'd be in worse shape than I'm in now." He shrugged, his wrists cramped and numb from the tether. "To be honest, I doubt I could walk on my own right now without falling down. Please – untie me."

Tannon nodded to Beck. The soldier grunted and slipped a dagger from the cuff of his boot. Thealos felt the ropes stretch and snap as the blade sliced through the bonds. Blood rushed into his hands, stinging his fingertips with pricks of life. He chafed his wrists, trying to keep from wincing at the bloody sores. Gingerly, he touched the back of his head where the mace had struck him and felt the matted blood. Beck untied the bonds around his ankles.

"How's that, boy?" Beck asked.

Thealos nodded appreciatively. "Thank you. May I see it?" He gestured for the sash. Taking the cloth, he brushed his hand along the length, finding where the stitching held the drape together. He examined the workmanship closely. It had obviously been steeped in mud or earth, but the fabric was of the highest quality, a rugged blend of wool and linen that kept well even outdoors. It was treated to protect it from the elements. Flipping it over, he examined the edging again.

"What does it say?" Beck asked excitedly.

"I haven't started reading it yet," Thealos replied. "My father is in the cloth business. It's definitely Silvan-made. See how the stitching is so tight and close?" He ran his forefinger over the tight weave. "No loose threads. Not one. A few good washings and you could sell this for a high price." Beck's eyes gleamed. "Now for the markings. Let me see." He started to read it in his mind, struggling with the cryptic notes of the ancient Shae language. He learned the Wolfsman's name and rank. "His name was Jade Shayler, and he bore the rank of a Lor. Impressive."

"What does his name mean?" Tomn asked, edging closer. He looked fascinated. "Don't Shaden names mean something?"

"You know a little about us, don't you?" Thealos said approvingly to the simple man.

Tomn grinned, embarrassed. "A little. But not much. So what does it mean?"

"Literally, Jade Shayler means 'green eyes.' There are some nuances too, but I doubt any of you would understand them." He gave Tannon a wry look. "The writing here and here describes his life, who trained him, what action he has seen." He rolled the fabric down, showing them the Silvan script. "But as you can see on this half, the fabric is empty down to there. He was young, for a Shae.

But I think I know how he died."

"And how could you know that?" Tannon asked.

"You're full of trope," Hoth cackled.

Thealos shook his head. "I'm only guessing. But the last thing written here is an encounter with a Sinew dragon. One that apparently menaced the Shae side of the river. Jade Shayler went after it." He looked from face to face. "I didn't think your band could have killed a Crimson Wolfsman. But a Sinew dragon could."

"A Sinew dragon," Tannon said sternly, folding his arms.

"A Sinew dragon," Beck agreed, his eyes lighting with mischief.

"You obviously know about them," Thealos continued.

"You'd find nary a man in Dos-Aralon who would," Hoth said with a grin. "But those in the army, especially the scouts…we know what's out in the valley. Sinew dragons lurk in a clutch in the swamps and woods, things you don't find anywhere near the city."

"Then you know that Sinew dragons like shiny things," Thealos said conspiratorially. "Greedy beasts, they kill to steal. Do you know why they're called…?"

"Because they're land dragons," another soldier butted in. Thealos didn't remember his name, though he recognized his voice from the night before. "They don't fly."

"But they jump," Hoth chimed in.

"I'm impressed with your band, Tannon," Thealos said with a charming grin. "You know a lot about this valley."

"More than you probably do, boy," the leader replied smugly. "What was your name again? Thallis?"

"Thealos," he replied. "Thealos Quickfellow."

He didn't dare ask if they were part of the Bandit Rebellion. Not yet.

* * *

Thealos squirmed uncomfortably and tried to pull the blanket over his legs, but his fingers were numb from the ropes and it took him a minute. The campfire crackled nearby and Cropper's shadow fell across him as he walked around it, near Thealos.

"Get out of my way," Cropper growled.

Thealos tried to scoot over, but he wasn't quick enough and Cropper kicked him hard in the chest. It hurt like fury, but he managed to bite back all but a grunt of pain. Thealos massaged his ribs, letting the air out of his chest slowly. He watched the ornery soldier stalk away from the night fire. Thealos swore under his breath, one of his favorite of Correl's curses that he reserved for doing business with humans. His wrists were bound in front of him this night, offering a little more comfort than he'd had the last two nights. His ankles were hitched together and snagged to a tree. They trusted him with information, but not freedom. As confidently as they talked of their skill as a band and in fighting, there was an unspoken fear of the Shae in their eyes. That somehow, if he were left without bonds, he would manage to steal a knife and cut their throats as they slept. Thealos didn't condone murder – it was certainly Forbidden. But he might have kicked Cropper in the ribs on the way out.

"He shouldn't have done that to you," Tomn said in a low voice across from the fire. He looked angry as he scrubbed the cauldron he used for cooking. Flakes of ash and hunks of soot were caked into the sides, making Thealos wince every time he ate the stew or broth that came out of it.

The stew wasn't burned, which would have been Forbidden, but the pot itself was disgusting.

"He must have hated pups as a child," Thealos joked, earning a smile from the timid cook. "I've really tried not to yelp too often." He gave Tomn a sad smile and rolled up against one of the thick maples in the grove. "You clean while the others sleep?" Tannon snored off to the left, his huge chest rising and falling with the ragged breathing.

Tomn shrugged, then scrubbed the inside of the small cauldron furiously. Dropping the blackened rag, he brushed his hands on his pants and went around the fire, closer to Thealos. "How do your eyes glow like that?" he asked, staring curiously at Thealos' face. For an instant, the cook looked as if he were tempted to put his finger in Thealos' eye.

"It's just the light from the fire," the young Shae replied. "Have you ever seen a cat in the dark?"

"A mountain cat? Out here in the valley?" Tomn laughed. "Oh, there's the little ones in the city. They're expensive. Even in Dos-Aralon, and you can rarely find a good seller. So the firelight makes them glow like that? Do mine glow?"

Thealos nearly rolled his eyes. "Of course yours don't, Tomn."

"Why do yours then? Does it hurt?"

"No. What do the Druid-priests tell you?"

"It depends which Druids you ask," Tomn replied, sitting comfortably. "The Council Druids say your eyes glow because you have knowledge and truth. But the Valley Druids, the ones down here, say you glow because you stare at the moon too long. I've been watching you the last few nights, Thealos, but I haven't seen you stare at the moon more than once or twice. Just glances, really."

Thealos laughed softly. "Do you know why they say we stare at the moon, Tomn?" The grubby cook shook his head no. "In our tradition, that's where our people came from. There are other worlds out there, Tomn. Not just this one. We came from that world on a floating city," he said, nodding towards the northern sky where the luminous blue crescent of Eroth could be seen through the gaps in the trees. Tomn smelled like cinders. "One day we'll return home when the city comes back for us. But not for a while, I think."

"You really believe that?" Tomn asked, his eyes betraying doubt.

Thealos nodded simply.

"The Valley Druids would say you're mad then. They don't believe in all those myths and things."

"Why would they?" the young Shae replied thoughtfully. "They just forget that what they know about the world, they learned from us. We came to this world to teach your kind, Tomn."

"Teach us what?" he laughed, amused.

"I'll save that for another night," Thealos replied. "If there's going to be another night."

Tomn's forehead wrinkled. He started scrubbing on the pot again. "I won't…I won't let them kill you, Thealos." He leaned forward, his face intense. "If you help us find that Sinew dragon treasure, I'll talk Tannon into letting you go. We don't want trouble with the Wolfsmen. We just need your help a little while."

"I don't think Tannon will listen to you," Thealos said with a wary smile. "Cropper hates me. And Tannon listens to him." He nodded towards the woods where the angry soldier stood watch.

"Tannon listens to me too," Tomn replied, dejected.

"I hope so," Thealos said, letting doubt syrup his voice.

Tomn flushed and leaned forward with a light whisper. "I could cut you loose and no one

would know how or why. Don't think I couldn't. You could have stole a knife or something and waited until we were asleep. Right?"

Thealos felt a smile twitch at the corner of his mouth. "I'm glad I have you looking out for me, Tomn. But I want to help you find that treasure. It could be worth a lot if the Sinew dragon is dead."

"I thought you said the dragon killed that Wolfsman?"

"I'm pretty sure he did," Thealos answered enigmatically. "But not many things can get the best of a Crimson Wolfsman. And a Lor is about as dangerous as they come."

Tomn nodded. "Yeah, I heard they're as good as the Sleepwalkers."

"The what?"

"That's right, you don't let Sleepwalkers into Avisahn, do you?" He could see the confusion in Thealos' eyes. "You've never heard of one? They dress in black and can walk in and out of a castle at midday without anyone even seeing their shadow on the ground. Trackers can't find them. Kings hire them to find things that are stolen or to kill someone who is high up and protected."

"Assassins?" Thealos probed.

"They do that too," Tomn agreed. "Except I hear they use magic. That or they're made out of magic. When they don't want you to, you can't see them." He shook his head in wonder. "Not even a Knight of Owen Draw can take one down."

"Is that so?" Thealos replied with a nod. "Tell me more, Tomn," he probed, seeing the excitement in the cook's eyes.

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After midnight, Thealos lay quietly in the camp watching the dying embers of the fire wink out one by one. He had already worked out how he was going to escape.

To be continued in the July 2002 issue of *Deep Magic*...